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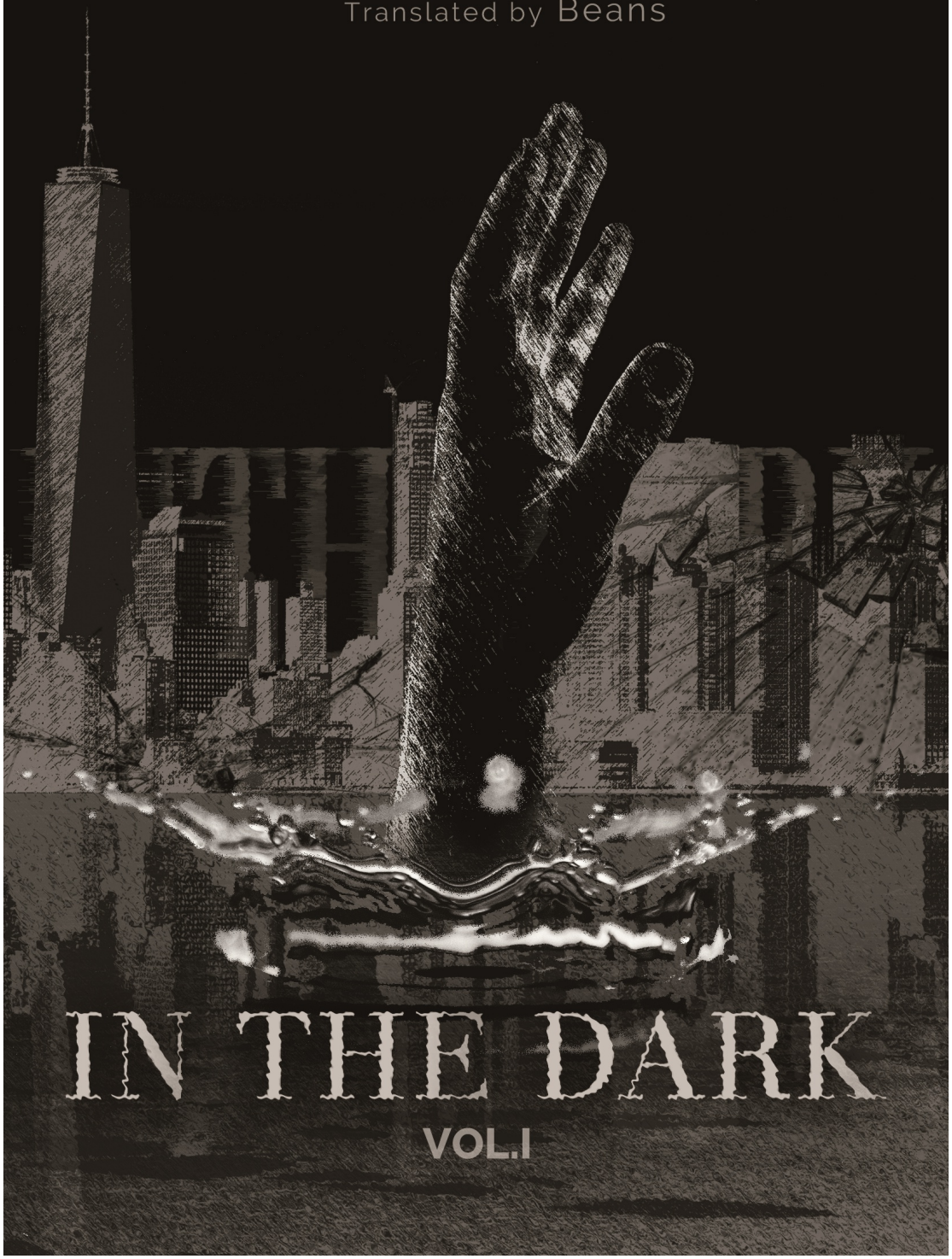

IN THE DARK

VOL.I

In the Dark

Volume 1

Jin Shisi Chai

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Character names are written in the order of the original Chinese naming style: family name first followed by the given name.

Learn how to pronounce the character names here!
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There will always be a pair of eyes watching you when you are unaware, in the dark.

Nightmare

A man sank into the water.

As usual, insomnia consumed him as the cold water brushed against his lips and nose, then flowed above his head. He opened his eyes slightly; his expression remained a peculiar balance between composure and dissociation.

The flooding sound of heavy rain followed roaring thunder as the fickle daylight vanished without a trace. Those who craved rest were already fast asleep. Xie Lanshan had forgotten when he developed this habit, sinking deep into the bottom of the bathtub. Underwater, he tightly held in his breath and wrestled against himself. His skin was already pruning. Occasionally, a bubble or two of air would float up, proving he was merely deep in thought beneath the water and not dead.

Suddenly, Xie Lanshan opened his eyes underwater. As if drowning in the deep sea, he reached an arm out into the void. The veins on the back of his hand popped and spread along his arm like a vine crawling upward—all the muscles in his body stiffened into a twisted form with this strange sensation.

He saw that woman again.

The woman was quite young, but her features were a blur. He saw himself press the woman's face into the bathtub; the water dyed blood red within an instant. The woman struggled for her life, pulling her face free again and again, only to be pushed down by him every time. He could hear her soundless, despairing scream through the water.

The floor was covered in blood.

This overly realistic and cruel hallucination stunned Xie Lanshan. He wanted to struggle and scream, but his body froze, unable to cry out.

Not until the very last second before he drowned could Xie Lanshan crawl up from the bathtub, escaping a near-death experience, panting loudly as he caught his breath. He stepped out of the bathtub without drying off and walked away, letting the water drip from his naked body onto the floor.

Xie Lanshan's skin was white, almost cream-like. But his limbs were long and strikingly fit; the muscles on his body carved deep lines into his flesh. He had worn the necklace for years, rarely taking it off. The necklace was made from a real bullet shell tied by a simple black leather string and was just long enough to fall near his heart.

The bathroom was a bit cramped, sealed, and tight like a cocoon. Xie Lanshan wiped the water vapor off the mirror with his hands and leaned in to study the face reflected there—the face of a handsome young man. His features were sharper and more defined than an average East Asian man; the light in his eyes was cold, but the curve of his lips was quite soft in contrast.

Xie Lanshan attempted to smile into the mirror but encountered an inexplicable awkwardness. Due to his near-drowning earlier, his puffy eyelids created a bit of slyness, which did not match his handsome face.

In the darkness of the bathroom, he quietly asked himself in the mirror, "Who are you?"

Cats meowed outside the window. It was 2 A.M. right now; Xie Lanshan grabbed a towel and wrapped it around his waist before he stepped out of the bathroom. He picked up the messy books left on the tea table in his living room. His gaze scanned the title. *Henshin*, by Japanese mystery novelist Higashino Keigo, was a part of the famous Higashino mystery trilogy. The story followed the violent crime spree of a formerly quiet and reserved man who, upon receiving a brain transplant, became a bloodthirsty and evil demon. Xie Lanshan was a fan of Higashino but had only finished a third of the story before finding the narrative too bland for his taste; even the artful prose couldn't keep him interested.

However, a line had left a lasting impression on him.

"Even if I am no longer myself, even if I become a bloodthirsty apostle of sin, even if the whole world has fallen into ruins, I will still love you with my whole life until death..."

Tossing the book aside, he opened the window in his living room and let the cold storm and wind into his house to blow away some of the heavy inside air. Along with the wind, the soft sounds of cats purring wafted in. Xie Lanshan looked out and blew a whistle at the few stray cats hiding below, gesturing for them all to return to their own little hubs.

The old townhouse was divided into two floors, each towering over three meters in height. Despite its grandiose exterior, nothing was fancy about this dark and old house. The residential area was scarcely populated with very few new faces; the existing residents were also strict with their curfews and virtually dead silent by the time night fell. Aside from the dozen or so stray cats that sometimes visited at night, no other sounds echoed during this hour.

Xie Lanshan quite enjoyed this peace, not minding that his only friends in the neighborhood were those strays. He was a "cat boss," in a sense, and naturally attracted their attention. Sometimes when he found himself busy with cases at work, he would shove two hundred yuan to the young neighbor girl to help feed them.

At the whistle, those little furballs remembered the man and obediently left.

Xie Lanshan sat down again in his room, leaned his head back, and closed his eyes, recalling the overly realistic dream.

That woman had appeared in his dreams often lately. Every time, he felt this shortness of breath—like he was falling into the abyss, yet whenever he woke from the dream and attempted to recall the face of the woman, nothing beyond that blurred image would come to him. No matter how he tried to pick up bits and pieces to put the puzzle back together, that face always hid behind a heavy layer of mist. Then, the moment before the mist dispersed, it exploded, decorating the floor with bloodied flesh.

The headache was still around; he couldn't sleep. Xie Lanshan decided to go out for a walk to clear his mind.

A new theater had opened near his house. To attract new audiences, the theater had started a "mystery movie week" campaign with discounted tickets, showing horror or mystery films rarely on the big screen during late-night hours.

The theater was almost deserted during the day but had quite the audience during the night. Aside from insomnia patients like Xie Lanshan, most were young couples looking for some excitement. They liked the adrenaline rush and used the darkness of the theater to do sneaky little things.

Perhaps due to the weather, few were at the movies tonight. Inside the large theater, only one other person joined Xie Lanshan in the audience. Just as the movie began, this person chose to sit in the worst spot in the front row; judging by the figure, it was most likely a man.

The film was a gloomy detective mystery story featuring religious motifs. The director had a good idea but pushed it a bit too far and had forcefully turned a detective film into a horror film. The scenes were full of shocking sequences with an equally cold and chilling soundtrack. Xie Lanshan was well versed in the usual pattern of these movies and could often guess the ending from only watching a clip of the beginning. He quickly lost interest in solving the mystery in the film and instead placed his attention on the other man, who piqued his interest.

At the very least, finding a weirdo who would watch a horror film in a theater during the middle of the night like this certainly wasn't common.

The light in the theater was dim; the man of interest wore a long black coat and kept his hat on even while indoors. His back remained upright and straight throughout the whole movie.

Watching a wide-screen too close could make one uncomfortable. Xie Lanshan raised his voice and said to the person, "I thought it was common sense to not watch a movie from the front row of a theater."

The latter seemed to have been waiting for Xie Lanshan to speak up and responded smoothly, "I like to observe people's expressions up close.

Especially people who have experienced fear, shock, and despair."

The person's voice was deep and soft, but with a piercing force to it that could penetrate and disperse the ink-black curtains of the night. Xie Lanshan couldn't help but grow more curious; a person with such a soothing voice must also have decent looks.

"Why?" he followed up.

"Career purposes."

Xie Lanshan thought about this, skipped the most obvious answer, and guessed as if he was walking on the edge of a blade, "Creative industry."

"Not quite." The person was humble. "I'm simply someone who draws."

Xie Lanshan almost couldn't believe he had guessed correctly; artists needed to be very observant and patient, so seeking inspiration was reasonable for the man. He then tried to remind the stranger, "This is only a movie. It's not real."

"Well, I can't possibly kill a real person now, can I?" The soft chuckle sounded as if the artist was aware he'd said something inappropriate.

The light from the screen brightened, and Xie Lanshan used this opportunity to study the man's profile. His hat covered his eyes, and making out individual features was hard, but the sharp jawline drawn out by the dim light of the movie made it clear he was handsome.

No one else was in the theater, so they didn't need to stay quiet. The two men discussed the method of the murder and the motivation of the culprit within the film, surprised to discover they shared almost the same views. Even the details and evidence in the film proved their theories hit the bull's-eye.

He didn't simply have a soothing voice but also a fine taste along with a clear sense of logic. In terms of technical investigation abilities, this man was on par with Xie Lanshan, or possibly even more experienced.

"The culprit is using murder as a method to preach their religion." The artist agreed with Xie Lanshan's theory and added, "There's an old proverb that says 'the rich man does not reside under a permanent roof'—the director's decision to kill off the third victim so easily might be the pitfall of this movie."

As his last syllable dropped, the third victim appeared in the movie—the rich person who showed up in the beginning without much screen time. Very well-hidden foreshadowing.

Xie Lanshan's impression of the man had been positive, but only now he felt regretful they hadn't met sooner. He was an experienced cop and had been working on the frontlines of criminal investigation for years, so naturally, he was equipped with some reasoning skills to solve cases. However, the man in front of him was too sharp and quick-witted to merely be a movie friend.

This provoked a bit of competition between the two men; they attempted to one-up each other in predicting the next part of the movie. The two men quickly wrote out the rest of the story, though the extra romance subplot the director shoved into the film served as a distraction.

"Wow, look at all those roses. I bet you this girl's about to give in and get in bed with the culprit."

"I bet you she won't."

"You think so?" Xie Lanshan was quite shocked; the two men had maintained a high rate of agreement. Their opinions only diverged on this obvious scene.

He was quite surprised to hear the artist say a little stubbornly, "I don't like roses."

The woman in the movie broke into tears of happiness and embraced the culprit. Outside of the screen, a cell phone ring echoed in the theater.

Xie Lanshan quickly quieted it. He had been suffering a headache all day to the point that he'd forgotten to silence his phone before walking into the theater.

As soon as he switched to silent mode, the call came in again.

He glanced at the bright screen. His boss probably wanted to speak about something important. Xie Lanshan had no choice but to get up to take the call, but before he could even step out of the theater, the man behind him said, "Do you know how I managed to guess that the third victim is the rich man?"

"Hm." Xie Lanshan turned his head around, but the man's gaze remained fixed on the screen.

"It's because I've already seen this movie."

The nonchalant response laid the shocking truth out before him. Xie Lanshan's interest in the man was fully roused. Before that reply, he had thought this man was a sharp and observant stranger who happened to share his interest. Now, he suddenly had a strange thought: this person was here for him.

Xie Lanshan went outside to take the call. His mentor Tao Jun from the Hanhai Public Security Bureau called to remind him he had to return to work tomorrow and must not be late.

By the time Xie Lanshan reentered the theater, the man was already gone.

In place of him was a tardy young couple engaged in a passionate kiss while dead bodies filled the whole movie screen.

Their kissing was annoyingly audible inside the empty theater. Noticing there were others in the theater, the young couple abruptly stopped and frantically regained their composure, embarrassed. Refusing to become the unwanted third wheel, Xie Lanshan strode out into the wind of the night with his hands in his pockets.

The rain stopped, and the moonlight shone brilliantly in the night sky, brightening even the heavy clouds of the storm. His heart was strangely light; a slight floral scent of spring rose from the moist soil after the rain.

(ii)

Weather in May was a quick coming and going of storms; the soil was fresh, and earth renewed once the rain ended.

Xie Lanshan hadn't slept well in the last few days and was reluctant to drive to the municipal bureau. Thus, he decided to take public transportation instead. On his way to work, he picked up his usual fried pancake with extra chili and cilantro. Xie Lanshan wasn't picky about his diet and wouldn't have minded stuffing himself with pancakes for the whole year.

The old man selling the pancakes had a wrinkled face, making him look as if he was in his seventies despite being only sixty. His last name was Tan, and people liked to call him Uncle Tan. The old man's skin was slightly tanned, but his hands were kept clean. Despite using more expensive oil, he still kept the price relatively cheap.

Uncle Tan said as he brushed a layer of oil on a pancake, "You haven't visited in a while."

Nodding, Xie Lanshan responded with slight annoyance on his face, "Got suspended for two months from investigation."

Uncle Tan sighed as he poured out another ladle of pancake batter and flattened it on the grill, then dropped another spoonful after noticing it was a little too thin. "I saw the news. That incident gets more ridiculous the more I look at it."

The incident had occurred two months ago. A pork seller had a violent dispute with his wife on the street; it began with the merchant, who sold the flesh of poultry and animals, suspecting his wife of also selling her own flesh. According to their neighbors' witness accounts, this individual had a history of domestic violence; he often beat his wife whenever they disagreed on anything. Normally, it was a push-and-shove; no one had expected the man to wave a knife in public and threaten murder.

At one point, the scene became quite dangerous. A passerby who tried to stop the fight was slit by the knife. Then the police failed to dissuade the perpetrator from acting on his threat. Drowning in anger, veins popping, the meat merchant raised the knife to strike down on his wife's head—a severe act of violence.

The People's Police Law explicitly states that, in emergency situations of refusing arrest or violent revolt, the police had the right to use arms. In the blink of an eye, Xie Lanshan had fired from a few hundred meters away and

killed the perpetrator. His precise aim and handsome posture were caught on video by people in the crowd, uploaded onto the internet, and stirred up a storm among the netizens.

After being saved from the blade of the guillotine, the wife offered tears of gratitude to Xie Lanshan. Yet, as soon as she turned to face the swarming media, she changed her tune; she claimed her husband merely meant to scare her and had no intention of actually killing her. She then added her husband was ready to put the knife down by the time the trigger was pulled, and that the sudden gunshot had brought his life to an end.

After the media twisted the story, the National Attorneys investigated the incident. Though the higher-ups called for a suspension of the investigation, they gave Xie Lanshan a severe punishment for violating procedure.

Uncle Tan placed two more extra spoonfuls of chili on top of the freshly cooked pancake, then rolled it up and handed it to Xie Lanshan. He said with a smile, “I see that you’re getting quite hotheaded lately and figured you might want some extra spice.” Uncle Tan was from the Sichuan region, and used to putting extra spice into all his cooking, regardless of whether it was for breakfast or supper.

Making a small sound of approval, Xie Lanshan dropped a ten-yuan bill without taking change back. He chatted with Uncle Tan for a little while until the trolley was about to close its door to leave. He jumped into the car and waved back at the old man before departing.

The old trolley, still running in the modern city, maintained the city’s history, its aged wheels trudging loudly as it weaved through the streets like a snake. Xie Lanshan bit into his pancake, not really minding the possibility of running late to work.

Before walking into the municipal bureau, he heard the security at the door call out to him, “There was another wave of reporters earlier. We’ve shooed them off for you already.”

“Thanks.” Xie Lanshan nodded toward the direction of security and walked inside the building.

Within the office of the Hanhai Public Security Bureau Criminal Investigation Unit, his mentor Tao Jun waited for him.

Tao Jun, once a captain of the border defense unit in his youth, had been a notorious, iron-fisted leader who fought courageously against drug dealers with both his wits and brawn. Unfortunately, he was injured during a mission and broke a leg, forcing him to back down from the frontlines and become a mentor in the municipal bureau. Age had taken a toll on his looks. He grew older by the day, the wrinkles on his face overtaking his sharp features. He didn’t scold Xie Lanshan for being late on the first day of returning to his post. The elder man pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and tossed one

smoke toward his disciple by the door.

Xie Lanshan caught the cigarette in his hands, placed it beneath his nose, sniffed it, and then frowned.

Tao Jun asked, “Did you quit?”

“No, but this brand isn’t good.” Long fingers playing with the cigarette, he leaned toward a female colleague’s desk, turned his head, and gave her a slightly flirtatious smile. He didn’t recognize her, so she had to be new; she had a small face with large eyes—pretty by common standards.

“Don’t be so picky when you’re poor. Don’t you get tired of it?” Tao Jun lit the cigarette in his hand and took in a drag. “You weren’t this particular before.”

The young girl was translating for an international case from the last few days. Then the handsome man’s smile made her heart skip, causing her to misspell a word on the report.

Xie Lanshan knocked lightly on her screen. “You got it wrong here.”

Tao Jun couldn’t help but frown at the scene. His already wrinkled face creased even more as he took on the expression of a tree trunk in winter; he asked Xie Lanshan, “Since when did you learn French?”

Xie Lanshan shot a glance back and said, “We can’t have people saying all cops are uncultured, right?”

Tao Jun smoked with his eyebrows still pressed together. “Stop fooling around. Do you know what the higher-ups plan on doing with you?”

For a month, the internet had hotly debated whether Xie Lanshan’s shot two months ago was proper law enforcement procedure or not. Recently, the discourse seemed to be settling. The Attorneys concluded the shot was certainly within lawful conduct due to the situation at hand, but the transfer notice had still come down.

Xie Lanshan had already guessed the ending. The main issue was that the situation had drawn too much negative attention. A police officer shooting down a criminal had become a soap opera of a bickering married couple, then the media had riled up the episode by questioning whether the shot was lawful. Under pressure from all around, it was fortunate his actions weren’t reported as an intentional homicide.

“They’re asking for you to report to the traffic police as soon as possible.” Tao Jun then pointedly asked, “Are you sure you don’t have any issues with this arrangement?”

Shrugging, Xie Lanshan grinned like it wasn’t his own business. “Old donkeys are just kicking a man when he’s down—what can I even say?”

Tao Jun’s blood boiled as he howled in anger, “Little shit! Who’s an old donkey—remember who’s in charge here! Watch your mouth and stop that nonsense!”

Of course, the complaint masked history. Tao Jun and Xie Lanshan's father, Xie Jiaqing, were colleagues and friends. The older Xie had given his life to protect his country and fallen in the line of duty. His wife had gone mad from her inability to accept her husband's death, leaving Tao Jun to mentor her son.

Old Tao knew the boy wasn't the type to study and had no future with higher education, so he naturally let the boy enroll in police school upon graduating from high school. Over the years, Tao Jun had certainly treated Xie Lanshan like his own son and raised the child as his successor, teaching him all the skills to become a proper criminal investigator. Xie Lanshan had matured within the blink of an eye, and his abilities as an investigator had grown as fast as his physique. Despite this, his character remained kind and compassionate, the calm personality in him unchanged.

Seven years ago, when Xie Lanshan had just graduated from the police academy, his boss set up a plan to put the new alumnus in prison for a few months. Upon his release, the young man was sent off to a sting operation in the jargon of the industry. In more common terms, he was sent to become an undercover agent for an antidrug investigation.

At the time, the head of the Golden Triangle, the largest armed drug-trafficking organization, was a drug lord by the name of Mu Kun. Rumor had it the man held six military divisions' worth of armed units and was a fearsome force, threatening law enforcement across borders. He once uploaded a video of himself beheading an American tourist on the internet, boastfully displaying his boundless cruelty and arrogance.

Xie Lanshan hadn't let his superiors down and spent only three years infiltrating Mu Kun's drug-dealing organization, becoming the legendary drug lord's right-hand man.

To call those years a near-death experience was an understatement, however, the last antidrug operation was only successful thanks to Xie Lanshan's reliable intel.

Of course, the brutal murder of an American tourist eventually convinced the US to send their investigators to join in the operation, turning it into a multinational effort. Yet that wasn't the end of Mu Kun. Even after being cornered, the man somehow managed to escape and vanished from the world. In consideration of Xie Lanshan's personal safety, the superiors had awarded him a Rank 2 Personal Meritorious Service Medal and reassigned him from the antidrug frontlines to the criminal investigation unit.

(iii)

Tao Jun turned to Xie Lanshan and said, "If you don't want to be transferred to the traffic department, fine, but you must go to therapy."

Xie Lanshan found this request interesting and made a little “oh” sound in response.

“Don’t rush to object. The one who’s working to help you out here is your old boss in the antidrug force,” Tao Jun said. “He brought up the request to send you to therapy. I agree with him; a traumatic case will certainly affect your work in the future, so you need a place to relieve your stress—”

“Wait, are you telling me to go get treatment for PTSD?” Xie Lanshan had never even considered the incident from two months ago to be an accident and almost laughed. “Please, we’re the homicide and violent crime unit. Who hasn’t seen a dead body around here, and why am I the only one that has to get therapy?”

His eyebrows still pressed together, Tao Jun corrected his student. “That’s not a dead body. It’s a life lost at your gunpoint. According to the wife, the husband was shot dead after he had already dropped his knife; do you not have anything else to say regarding the incident?”

“Nothing. Dying instantly from a gunshot isn’t even painful.” The smile on his handsome face suddenly vanished. A rare sternness entered Xie Lanshan’s tone as he spoke, mixed with a bit of coldness and mockery. “Death seems almost promising if you consider it closely; it’s something we all yearn for. It’s a friend we haven’t seen in a long time.”

Something dark and chilling flashed beneath those pupils, momentarily stunning Tao Jun. The Xie Lanshan before him seemed like a completely different person.

Displeased by this disrespectful attitude toward human life, Tao Jun roared, “What kind of evil nonsense are you speaking?! That was a human life in your hands!”

“Unfortunately, this evil nonsense isn’t my own—it’s a quote from Schopenhauer.” Xie Lanshan was tired of listening to this nagging. He shrugged and smiled. “Read some more books, old man.”

“You little rascal!” Tao Jun slapped down hard on Xie Lanshan’s back.

As the mentor-student duo chatted, another man stepped inside the room. He paraded a tall and sharp figure, wide and thick shoulders with dapper facial features. Right next to the corner of his eye was a six- to seven-centimeter-long scar, cutting diagonally down like a tear mark. There were two captain Taos in the homicide and violent crime unit; the father Tao Jun used to lead the unit in the past, and now the job was succeeded by his son, Tao Longyue.

Like father, like son, Tao Longyue was a tall man with his mother’s looks but his father’s personality. He had already been involved in many major cases from an early age.

Upset his father had held a bias toward his disciple, Tao Longyue had held a grudge against Xie Lanshan when they were kids.

Xie Lanshan was naturally more reserved and introverted as a person, a man of few words and smiles. On top of that, losing his father when he was young made him even quieter than most people of his age. Getting a reaction out of him was virtually impossible. He never returned a punch, no matter how much Tao Longyue had attempted to provoke him, nor had he ever complained to Tao Jun about the harassment. While it had seemed like he simply didn't want to cause trouble, it was more accurate to say he hadn't cared.

One day when Tao Longyue and Xie Lanshan had been taken back to Tao Jun's home, an earthquake struck. The old house collapsed within an instant, with no one else inside but them. After Xie Lanshan crawled out of the ruins, the boy ran without a second thought to save Tao Longyue, risking even his own safety.

The scar on Tao Longyue's face was from that incident. The doctor said the boy was lucky to have been saved in time; if he had been left for a little longer in the ruins, his legs would have been crushed.

Including Tao Longyue, Xie Lanshan saved a total of five people during that earthquake. To rescue those stuck under the ruins, the young boy had bloodied his hands digging. Two nails were ripped from his fingers, with another on the brink of breaking. Blood and flesh blended together until discerning the color of his skin was difficult.

After the calamity, cries of despair and pain filled the air—yet Xie Lanshan sat alone on the ground and quietly treated his own wounds. He was still young at the time; his figure was slim and small, making him look even smaller when he sat down by himself. But that solitary figure framed by a few rays of sunlight peeking from the skies made him look aloof and unreachable, as if he was glowing with Buddha's blessing.

After being saved, Tao Longyue felt indebted to the boy and gave a sincere apology to Xie Lanshan for all the offenses he had committed in the past.

However, when he did this, Xie Lanshan turned up to look at him in confusion and asked softly, "For what?"

Tao Longyue cried, "For bullying you all the time. Like last time when you were returning a baby bird back to its nest up in the tree, I grabbed a few kids from our group to throw rocks at you and made you fall down."

That certainly had been a hard fall; the little boy's back had hit the ground violently, and he couldn't get up for a while, yet the little bird that he held in his arms had remained unharmed.

Xie Lanshan squinted to recall the incident and then said calmly, "I forgot."

He seemed to really have forgotten.

Tao Longyue finally admitted his defeat. Like a resting volcano, Xie Lanshan was silent but held a powerful force within the depths of his body.

His big heart could not be tainted by anything of the mortal world; even the slightest hint of selfishness could never stain his pure soul.

Therefore, Tao Longyue agreed with his dad: Xie Lanshan had changed.

It wasn't a sudden change either; it was something subtler, quietly happening beneath the surface. A kind of change one wouldn't notice seeing the man every day, but after two months off duty, the difference was striking and noticeable.

Gaze lowered, Xie Lanshan listened to Tao Jun scold him, though his curious eyes never left the new girl at the desk.

Tao Jun failed to notice his son's behavior and continued to complain, "Listen to yourself earlier. Are you still a cop...?"

Xie Lanshan shot a smile at the young woman and mouthed soundlessly to her: *Don't worry about me; I have to shoulder this responsibility in exchange for wearing this uniform.*

Tao Jun also continued to fire out the frustration inside him. "You better not complain or blame anyone either. It's a responsibility you must shoulder in exchange for wearing this uniform."

Xie Lanshan once again mouthed the words in tandem to the new girl: *If you want to keep this job, you better fix your attitude and do it properly. If you don't, you better leave now.*

"If you want to keep your job, you better fix your attitude and work properly, or you can leave right now—"

The last line was almost word-for-word; the young lady couldn't hold back and a small laugh escaped her from her desk.

An expression of playfulness still on his face, Xie Lanshan raised his index and middle fingers together to his forehead and gave a small salute to the new recruit. Then he once again mouthed: *Dinner's on me tonight*.

Absorbed in his lecture, Tao Jun still failed to notice the two young cops shooting each other glances, but Tao Longyue witnessed the whole exchange from start to finish.

The Xie Lanshan in the past had been reserved almost to the point of detachment; a man of few words, unapproachable despite his handsome looks. Yet the Xie Lanshan who had returned from his undercover mission was fluent in smooth-talking and even seemed to have changed how he looked at others. Something called "charm"—a word never once associated with his name in the past—showed in his personality. He had a dandy air about him like a classy playboy.

The rest of the cops in the room noticed Tao Longyue and called out, "Captain Tao."

His face still stern, Tao Longyue turned to Xie Lanshan. "There's a homicide case at a luxury residential community in the West Street area; six

dead. No survivors among the five members of the family or their at-home nanny."

(iv)

At the report of this tragic massacre, the main investigation team from the homicide and violent crime unit of Hanhai City was dispatched immediately. Tao Longyue and Xie Lanshan got in the same car: the two men took the front seats, while the newly recruited young lady sat in the back.

When he saw the man in low spirits, Tao Longyue teased Xie Lanshan, "Hey, you know how the higher-ups have a rule about not allowing us to share details of a case to unrelated parties? Do you think I'm breaking the rules here taking a traffic-cop buddy to the crime scene?"

The perpetual nightmares over the last few days had pulled a nerve inside Xie Lanshan's head tight until it was ready to snap at any moment. He rubbed on his temples; the headache was coming back, and he had no intention to joke around with Tao Longyue.

"What's up—not feeling well?" Tao Longyue asked.

"No," Xie Lanshan responded nonchalantly, "just haven't slept well lately."

The headache was a remnant from his undercover work. It had started with short and tolerable episodes but lately had grown to be more violent and unbearable, to the point it was starting to affect his everyday life. Yet Xie Lanshan couldn't afford to fall ill in front of the Tao family, in fear they would suspect he was doing drugs.

"Here's a cig. Pick yourself up." With a free hand, Tao Longyue pulled a pack of old cigarettes from his pocket and tossed it toward Xie Lanshan on the passenger's side.

Xie Lanshan quickly glanced at the cheap packaging in distaste.

Tao Longyue said in amusement, "Man, it's one thing to judge the old man's taste, but are you really going to be picky even with some good Ol' China?" Like Xie Lanshan, he referred to his own father as "old man."

Xie Lanshan pinched the small red box and pulled a cigarette out, almost reluctant to put it into his mouth. "Light?"

Tao Longyue swiftly produced a lighter and lit the cigarette for him.

"Where do you even get all the money for fancier smokes?" Xie Lanshan blew out a light cloud of smoke and put the cigarette down after one puff. He still couldn't stand the taste of the Old China brand. "Did you break the disciplinary code?"

"How could I? Someone else shoved them at me. You know—during that joint mission between the tobacco control and public security to clean out all the illegal tobacco merchants around the area. They managed to catch five

smoke sellers, and I happened to know one of the suspects," Tao Longyue said. "It's that Zhang Yuchun kid. I'm sure you've seen him before."

Xie Lanshan nodded. "I remember."

"Kid used to be a druggie, but now he's quit and gone clean. It's tough to earn a living and maintain a family. I've seen students wearing middle school uniforms buying smokes from him before, but he raised a fist and scared those kids all off. I asked around and found out that among the five suspects arrested during that case, he was the only one who never sold illegal smokes. So, I went to see the local police working on the case. Even though that Zhang kid doesn't have citizenship, his offense was relatively light. I asked them to let him go without jail time and only a warning as long as procedure allowed for it." Tao Longyue laughed. "You taught me that. Being strict with the law but lenient in practice is what makes a law enforcer benevolent."

Xie Lanshan fell silent and didn't comment further on this lesson he had supposedly taught. He only asked, "How's the kid doing lately?"

"Heard him mention doing food delivery or something. I don't remember," Tao Longyue said. "Enough about the kid—let's talk about you."

"What's so interesting about me?" Xie Lanshan laughed. "I'm sure all-knowing Captain Tao can see better than anyone when I have a sore on my ass."

"What the heck were you doing during your two-month suspension? You wouldn't even come out during our break."

"Nothing much, just wandered around, appreciated the natural environment in this country."

"What, and you're still complaining?" Tao Longyue could tell this was a half-hearted response. "I also think it's a bit much to transfer you for this incident, and therapy is even more ridiculous."

"Tell that to your dad." Xie Lanshan turned and shot a glance at him, then responded lazily, "I might as well say goodbye to the whole bureau if I get another transfer."

"Old man's actually doing this for your sake." Tao Longyue let out a long sigh. "The old man used to have a subordinate who went mad after an undercover mission. Even his wife couldn't recognize her own husband anymore and ran away with their daughter. A veteran cop who didn't even flinch when he bled turned into someone who could do nothing but stare at the sky and cry. Not long after returning, he picked up drugs, quit for a while, then went right back to substance abuse; the man couldn't stand suffering and finally ended his own life. I'm sure my old man's just worried the stress is going to weigh down on you and force you down the same path."

Xie Lanshan had also heard about the antidrug officer's story. This was nothing strange: undercover agents were always walking on the edge and

acting out the role of someone else. Living long-term in that kind of environment made them prone to heavy stress, which easily led to mental illness. Superficial acting could cost one's life, but an act too dedicated to the cause could consume a person's mind.

Yet Xie Lanshan didn't feel too pressured psychologically. Of course, people were curious about his experience as an undercover cop and wanted to hear stories, but the man's default response was always to say he had forgotten what happened.

"Speaking of which..." Tao Longyue let out another sigh. "There's something I don't quite understand. Is someone out to get you or something? You barely managed to escape that life-and-death mission from Mu Kun, but that operation would never have been possible without you. They can't even give you a Rank 1 medal for that? Rank 2 isn't too bad, but you've been on a roll in the violent crime unit ever since, and they still haven't even offered you a promotion to vice-captain rank."

When they were young, Tao Longyue had his turn bullying Xie Lanshan, so now it was time for him to repay his childhood friend as grown adults. He had always felt the higher-ups were being too harsh with Xie Lanshan and wasn't comfortable taking the title of homicide and violent crime unit captain. He'd offered to give his position to the more deserving officer, but the higher-ups hadn't accepted his proposal.

"Mu Kun? That drug lord from the Golden Triangle Mu Kun?" The quiet young woman in the back seat finally spoke up and leaned forward as she heard the name. She said dramatically to Xie Lanshan, "So, you're the undercover cop that stayed under Mu Kun for six years."

Xie Lanshan said, "Not six years. The first two years were spent as a lackey. It was difficult to earn his trust."

The young woman, Ding Li, had just been hired into the homicide and violent crime unit due to her outstanding work. Hanhai City was developing and gaining new blood by the day. More foreigners began to walk the streets and the nonlocal crime rate rose; thus, the demand for bilingual officers in the municipal bureau only grew. Her spirit for gossip riled up in excitement, she latched on to Xie Lanshan. "Is it true Mu Kun was a handsome man? I heard he's multiracial and is a quarter Chinese. I saw some of those blurry photos on the internet before—it seemed like he also had a little facial hair or something; a little seductive too."

Xie Lanshan thought about it and nodded. "I guess he's not bad."

Ding Li leaned in closer toward Xie Lanshan; her smile grew wider and more improper. "I also heard he's gay."

Xie Lanshan laughed. "You knew about that too?"

“It’s all over the forums on the internet. The hottest drug lord since the 818 incident. Too bad that post got removed later.” Ding Li lowered her voice to elicit intrigue. “The original post also said that Mu Kun was a cruel, calculating man who trusted no one. They said our undercover officer managed to sneak in because he caught Mu Kun’s eye—”

Xie Lanshan choked on air.

“Hey, public security, get those indecent thoughts out of your head!” Tao Longyue scolded Ding Li and then shot a glance at Xie Lanshan. He changed the topic. “Speaking of which, I heard from the old man that the former antidrug force, public security, and border security units sent undercover agents to the Golden Triangle before, but nobody even managed to get a look at Mu Kun’s face, so maybe the rumors aren’t baseless. Do you think he actually had the hots for you?”

Though it was nothing but a rumor, Xie Lanshan purposely shot the man a suspicious smile. “That’s classified.”

“The armed drug trafficking organization left by Mu Kun has been on the rise again over the last two years, but the scale is significantly smaller than before.” Tao Longyue knew Xie Lanshan wasn’t interested in discussing more about his time during the undercover mission and paused before speaking up again, “People have been saying that Mu Kun was a madman through and through; murder and arson meant nothing to him. They said he raised a group of vicious dogs to feed on the flesh of any subordinate who dared to disobey him—”

Ding Li quickly chimed in, “That’s not even the worst of it—he’s done more awful things than that.”

Rubbing his temples, Xie Lanshan made a small sound of agreement.

Tao Longyue turned and shot another glance at Xie Lanshan. “I’m just curious—is Mu Kun really a madman like everyone claims?”

To everyone’s surprise, Xie Lanshan fell into silence at this question.

Ding Li sat back down in the back seat, and Tao Longyue didn’t speak another word. The silence inside the car almost became awkward, as if the air was pressing into delicate bone china, ready to shatter it to pieces.

After a long moment of wordless contemplation, Xie Lanshan extinguished his cigarette. “Yes.”

(v)

The crime scene was called the Jing Jiang Grand Garden, which revealed itself to be a luxury residential community from its name alone. The community was filled with similarly designed two-story single-family homes, each with their own balcony and underground parking spot. The locks on the

doors and windows weren't particularly fancy and could easily be broken into, but the entire community was filled with surveillance cameras in every corner. Even the front doors were marked with clear warning signs that read, "This gated community is under full surveillance at all times."

Therefore, unless a would-be criminal could turn invisible or had superpowers, it was impossible to sneak into a house unnoticed—that is, it would have been had the surveillance room not coincidentally caught fire the night before.

The yellow-and-white cordon tape already stretched the perimeter of the crime scene. When the police car pulled up to Jing Jiang Grand Garden, a crowd of bystanders already waited outside the house of the homicide victims like a flock of pigeons waiting to be fed.

Xie Lanshan and Tao Longyue walked past the crowd, stepped over the tape, and walked through the door of the mansion. The forensic science division had already arrived and was conducting their on-site investigation.

The moment they stepped through the doorway, the rotting smell of blood rushed toward them like a thick wall of air permeating the noses of the investigators.

Tao Longyue shook his head sorrowfully as he looked at the crime scene. "How brutal."

Six corpses lay in a pool of blood inside the house: a middle-aged husband and wife, a young woman fresh out of college, an elderly woman with a bad leg, a nanny hired to take care of her, and an elementary school student visiting for the weekend, only seven years old.

The corpses were arranged with intention, in the strange manner of a ritual offering. The girl lying in the center was completely naked, curled up to signify a fetus inside a mother's womb. The rest of the bodies were placed on their sides like a chain circling the girl at the center.

A strange mark was carved on the flesh near the stomach of the female body in the center, and both of her hands were chopped off from the wrist.

The floor was covered in blood.

Slowing his footsteps, Xie Lanshan frowned; the expression on his face was immensely grave. The scene from his dreams flashed before his eyes—this bloody crime scene looked ever so familiar.

That nerve in his head was being squeezed again, as if something were clenching his brain tightly.

Tao Longyue noticed the change in Xie Lanshan's expression. "What's wrong?"

Xie Lanshan didn't respond and simply rubbed his temples, then shot another glance at the living room where the dead rested. His gaze fell on some plastic takeout boxes gathered to the side of the kitchen, then a piece of memo

paper stuck onto the refrigerator. On the paper was a time highlighted with a handwritten note below: Need to meet with a friend.

He turned and walked up to the second floor of the mansion.

All on-site investigators had their gloves on at this point, ready to get down to work when Tao Longyue called out to the man, "You're not going to check out the crime scene?"

Xie Lanshan didn't stop. Only his head turned slightly as he offhandedly said, "A carefully prepared murder scene has no value. I'll wait for the autopsy report."

Despite certain truths in those words, Tao Longyue could clearly remember the time when they were both still interning in the police academy and ran into a similar mass-murder case. A family of four had been discovered almost two weeks after their brutal slaughtering. By the time the investigators arrived, the corpses were already highly decomposed and crawling with worms. The corpse of the twelve-year-old girl in the bathtub was especially horrific. Her bloated body was already unsightly, which only struck a jarring contrast with the bright red dress she wore in her death. None of the new recruits could handle the disgusting scene and puked into the garbage; Xie Lanshan was the only one who cried.

Not loudly in shock or horror. He simply frowned slightly as he stared at the family photo hanging on the wall, and a single tear rolled down his cheek. The little girl in the photo smiled brilliantly like the sunlight above her, sweet and vibrant. She was wearing the same red dress—perhaps it was her favorite piece of clothing.

Tao Longyue was one of the interns who retched the sour bile in his stomach. After finally swallowing the bitter aftertaste in his mouth, he walked over to check on Xie Lanshan. He had a thought: perhaps Xie Lanshan's kindness and empathy that people often spoke so highly of were in fact traits engraved into the man's soul.

In the present day, Xie Lanshan walked around the mansion as Ding Li followed behind him, constantly asking eager and silly questions like, "Do you think the culprit is family or a friend?"

Xie Lanshan suddenly stopped and turned around to ask her, "You've seen the corpse already?"

The sudden appearance of a handsome man's face before her distracted Ding Li, and she almost crashed into his chest. Flustered, she stuttered, "Y-yes, I have."

A hint of jest surfaced on Xie Lanshan's face. "Not bad, you didn't even puke."

"That's not something worth praising." Ding Li shrugged nonchalantly. "Have you seen the Top Ten Tianya Mysteries? The threads were filled with

detailed descriptions and photos. It's even more disgusting than the actual crime scene. I could read those threads while eating instant noodles."

"That forum sure has everything and anything." Xie Lanshan walked into the young woman's bedroom. He studied the space before reaching the desk near the window, flipping through the items.

The room had a white-and-pink motif with simple decorations. It was well organized by its owner, and the large canna flowers outside the window danced in the wind.

The young woman, Cong Ying, was a new hire at her workplace; Xie Lanshan had found her graduation certificate and résumé. She had a small and pretty face, decent even in mugshot photos. She graduated only a year ago, just starting her second job as a graphic designer at a design firm.

Ding Li leaned in to look at the profile and said with slight pity, "Even such a pretty and colorful person becomes gray when they die."

Inside Cong Ying's notebook was a flyer for a wedding fair scheduled to take place at the same time highlighted on the note on the fridge. Xie Lanshan discovered a metal photo frame kept inside the drawer of her desk. The frame faced down and held a photo of Cong Ying and a man.

The man looked to be in his early thirties; his suit and leather shoes highlighted his professionalism. He had large eyes, a double lid, and even if his facial features weren't striking, they were arranged nicely enough on his face to make him quite elegant. Cong Ying's arms were wrapped around the man in a very intimate pose. The combination of the beautiful girl and handsome lad fit the description of a good-looking couple, a heaven's match in the eyes of the general public.

Ding Li was a special bilingual recruit with no experience in crime scene investigations. Upon following Xie Lanshan into the bedroom, she wandered around the room aimlessly. No bloodstains marred the bed or the floor, which clearly indicated this wasn't the scene of the murder. She wasn't exactly sure what she was searching for.

Xie Lanshan was going through the female victim's belongings, and Ding Li couldn't help but stare at him. The man was tall and large, but his facial features were delicate like marble. His fingers were long and elegant, highlighted by the latex gloves worn for investigations.

Ding Li's eyes were glued on Xie Lanshan, but the man's attention was focused on his search and never wandered.

He went into a daze staring at the photo in his hands, only to suddenly say to her, "Stay focused. There's no evidence on my face."

"Uh, so is it possible that this man in the photo is the culprit?" Ding Li quickly pulled her wandering mind back to the case. "A lot of mass-murder cases like this on the forums listed the boyfriend or son-in-law as the prime

suspect."

Ding Li had the heart to get closer to her handsome senior; despite his sometimes inappropriate behavior in the bureau, the man was extremely focused and serious on the job. Noticing how she didn't even receive a response, she suddenly lowered her voice and leaned in toward Xie Lanshan to say almost eerily, "Do you want to know what else that thread about you and Mu Kun said?"

Silently, Xie Lanshan looked at Ding Li. The color of the man's eyes was quite unique; in contrast to his deep and defined facial features, his eyes were a light color, somewhere between an amber or red-brown. Facing against the light at this moment, the color seemed crimson.

The look in his eyes darkened as Xie Lanshan slowly opened his mouth. "No matter what you say, it's best that you forget it all for the sake of your own safety."

His strange gaze reminded her of those corpses bathed in blood down on the first floor; Ding Li's heart almost stopped.

"Just kidding, silly girl. I'm teasing you." Seeing how horrified the young woman was, Xie Lanshan lifted a corner of his lips. His gaze also lightened as a soft smile spread across his face. "Here, tell me what you think about this case."

(vi)

"There are no signs of the door locks being pried, nor did the neighbors hear anything strange from the house. So, it's highly likely the family is familiar with the culprit."

"Okay, tell me something more interesting." Xie Lanshan placed the photo into the evidence bag and handed it to Ding Li, then turned toward Cong Ying's bookshelf filled with books of all sizes, from novels to comics, and reference books on design.

"This place is in a high-income residential community surrounded by surveillance cameras, so it would be extremely difficult for the culprit to leave the crime scene without leaving a trace." Ding Li didn't have much experience in criminal investigation but had enough common sense to reason her way through. "The surveillance footage and data are usually uploaded and compiled in cloud-based storage, so destroying the hardware won't affect the data on the server. As long as we can obtain the footage from the service provider, it shouldn't take too long for us to find the killer."

"The police force certainly lacks optimistic new recruits like you." Gaze still fixed on the rows of books, Xie Lanshan smiled offhandedly. This would be a difficult case to deal with, regardless of whether there was surveillance

footage.

"Yo, a-Lan, did you hear how unfortunate we are?!"

Captain Tao of the homicide and violent crime unit was notorious for his loud voice. The man was like a storm tearing through anywhere he walked—his voice already made its way up the stairs before his physical body could appear.

Xie Lanshan removed his eyes from Cong Ying's bookshelf and turned to the doorway, where Tao Longyue now was.

"The footage from last night didn't manage to fully back up on the cloud when the surveillance room caught on fire." The two men exchanged glances as Tao Longyue said with slight frustration, "The techs are preparing to repair the lost data, but we're still uncertain whether we can manage to restore it."

"The service equipment usually backs up once every twenty-four or forty-eight hours." Xie Lanshan's expression was calm as he continued, "I figured as much."

Tao Longyue said, "I've asked the security guard on night shift already; he said he's spotted a woman hanging around the community area lately. Her face was covered with a silk scarf so he couldn't really see her features, but judging from her clothing and manners, she seemed fairly well-off and not a burglar or shady person. So, he didn't really pay her much attention. Last night around 2 A.M., he heard a loud noise and went outside his post to check. By the time he returned, the surveillance room was already on fire. The fire spread very quickly; he originally thought the wires short-circuited until he heard about the murders and realized something was off about that woman."

"So, is this woman a suspect then?" Ding Li rushed to show off before her seniors and attempted to analyze the case by contributing a question. "But security didn't even get a good look at her face, and we can't guarantee that we'll be able to restore the surveillance footage. This is like searching for a needle in a haystack. How are we supposed to find this woman?"

"And that's why you're new here." Tao Longyue looked proud of himself. "Latest news, our bureau is getting a new forensic sketch artist soon."

"Forensic sketch artist? Male or female? Are they good-looking?" Ding Li's eyes glistened in excitement; this was a popular character trope in American crime shows and movies—they were often portrayed as super-intelligent individuals who could solve a complicated case with one line.

"I don't know much beyond that—I only heard about this from my old man. I forgot if their last name is Chen or Shen, but I know they're some sort of expert in criminal profiling through forensic art. Apparently, they worked with the FBI when they were in the States and helped solve a lot of cases." Tao Longyue turned to tease Xie Lanshan and patted the man's shoulder. "So there. The violent crime unit won't fall apart without you around. You can

enjoy your new job as a traffic cop."

"Piss off. The US and China are on the brink of economic warfare. Stop trying to rile people up like that." Xie Lanshan wasn't impressed by the comments. While criminal profiling and forensic art sounded mysterious and impressive, neither field was widely recognized in China; in addition, they weren't practical in actual criminal investigations. He turned his head to see Ding Li's eyes still filled with admiration and felt quite insulted. "Hey, girl, wipe that depraved look off your face. I'll bet you this forensic artist from abroad isn't even 170 centimeters tall, has an old face full of wrinkles, and is bald."

"Doctor Su is about to close up." Tao Longyue suggested Xie Lanshan accompany him downstairs and asked, "Do you have any thoughts about this case?"

"Let's talk about your findings first." The three started walking out the door, but Xie Lanshan hesitated before the threshold, turned his head, and squinted at Cong Ying's bookshelf again.

"The head of the house is Mr. Cong, who is also the only adult male victim in this case. His full name is Cong Zhiming, and he was quite successful as a businessman. He's likely earned himself some envious eyes. His wife is Ding Hong, a full-time housewife with a much simpler pool of social relations. And the old lady is the least likely to be involved here. Her legs have been failing her, so she normally doesn't leave the house. Doesn't seem like she'd earn herself any mortal enemies. My initial analysis suggests the key to solving the case will be either Cong Ying or her father Cong Zhiming."

Xie Lanshan nodded but kept his thoughts to himself.

At this point, the forensic science division had already completed their initial investigation at the crime scene. The leader of the division was Su Mansheng, a forensic doctor from the municipal bureau of criminal investigation. Xie Lanshan and Ding Li were walking down the stairs when they saw Su Mansheng reporting the autopsy to Tao Longyue. The man listened carefully to the slightly aloof and attractive doctor.

Su Mansheng's beauty stood out, even amongst women. She was tall, and her fine figure would have allowed her to blend in even if she were thrown among a group of celebrities. Naturally, she was the spotlight of attention in a man's world like the Hanhai Public Security Bureau. Rumor had it that, unlike most people who had no choice but to transfer into the forensic science department, she had voluntarily enrolled in the public security academy with grades high enough to attend top universities in the country—her childhood aspiration had supposedly been to "let the dead speak."

"All six victims died from hemorrhagic shock. Their major arteries were pierced by a sharp object. The time of death is currently estimated to be

around early A.M. last night. Judging from the depth of the wounds and penetration force, the weapon used was a kitchen knife of about five centimeters long. All victims were murdered by the same culprit. Aside from the young woman, who had seventeen stab wounds along the neck, shoulder, and abdomen areas, all other victims expired after two to three penetrations. For a more detailed autopsy report, we will need to dissect the corpses of the victims, of course." Su Mansheng's voice chilled as she addressed Tao Longyue. "Captain Tao, I hope that you and your team can arrive on time in the future."

"I'll be careful next time, I promise." Tao Longyue nodded obediently. Before Su Mansheng's intimidating beauty, the strict and tough-skinned violent crime unit captain became a loyal eunuch following behind a proud empress.

The forensic science division transferred the corpses to the bureau for dissection and further analysis, then Tao Longyue once again asked Xie Lanshan for his thoughts.

Xie Lanshan said, "The primary murder scenes included the living room, master bedroom, and nanny's room. In addition, the secondary scene was cleanly arranged without evidence useful to solving the case, which shows this wasn't a spur-of-the-moment murder due to an emotional outburst. Aside from Cong Ying, all other victims died with one or two stabs to the heart. Consider, too, that the murders occurred in the middle of the night, but that the neighbors didn't hear anything happen. In order to kill a family of six in such a short time without letting them escape, fight back, or call for help, two important things about the culprit must be true: one, they must be very familiar with the family's background, and two, they must be physically stronger than the victims."

"And?"

"Powder foundation and eyeshadow were found on one victim's face at the time of death. She was at home in the middle of the night with makeup on. Judging by the fact that she had dressed up, we can conclude she was seeing someone of relative importance to her the night before the crime."

"Yeah, hm." Tao Longyue nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly with the deductions.

Xie Lanshan took an evidence bag from Ding Li and handed it to Tao Longyue, who peered at the photograph inside. "And this is?"

"The young woman, who graduated from college not too long ago, kept a street flyer about a wedding exhibit. She even went so far as to tape a piece of paper on the fridge to remind herself to visit the exhibit, which shows her relationship with her boyfriend is stable enough to consider marriage as the next step. Yet even at this stage of their relationship, she didn't dare to put a

photo of them together on her desk. The date she marked down was clearly the date of the wedding exhibit, but she lied to her family and claimed she was 'seeing a friend,' which proves that her parents clearly were not fond of this future son-in-law."

"You think the man in this photo is a suspect?" Tao Longyue lifted his eyes. Su Mansheng was shepherding the forensic science division out of the scene; he couldn't help but follow her. "Anything else you want to add?"

"Also." Xie Lanshan shot a glance at Tao Longyue and then followed the man's gaze to the tall figure by the door. He smiled. "Doctor Su doesn't like men."

"Who—who said I was asking about her?!" Tao Longyue realized that his longing gaze gave himself away and choked upon his words. After recalling Xie Lanshan's track record with solving cases, he asked reluctantly, "How do you know?"

"She didn't even look me in the eye the entire time we've been here. I can't think of any other explanation aside from the fact that she's a lesbian." Along with a conceited and debonair smile, Xie Lanshan gave Tao Longyue a pat on the back. "Fate hasn't looked kindly upon you. It's not your fault; chin up."

A Hostile Encounter

The team did not find Cong Ying's cell phone at the crime scene, so Tao Longyue asked around the neighborhood in the hopes of learning more about the man in the photo. According to the night-shift security, a silver BMW drove Cong Ying to the residential community the previous afternoon. The car had shown up multiple times in the past, increasing the likelihood that the driver was Cong Ying's boyfriend. Unsurprisingly, the guard identified the boyfriend—also the driver—as the man in the photo.

Despite the positive ID, the team failed to find the silver BMW in the underground parking lot, which was connected to each residence. Tao Longyue asked the guard, "When did the car leave?"

"Around 3 or 4 A.M., I think. It drove out from the main gate of the community."

"Are you sure?" Captain Tao was suspicious; the Cong family should have already been dead after midnight, so what was Cong Ying's boyfriend doing lingering behind a house where a mass murder had just occurred?

"Of course." The security guard seemed quite confident in himself. "The surveillance room caught on fire at around 2 A.M., so none of us dared to take our eyes off the area since then."

Upon questioning the other neighbors, no one recognized Cong Ying, who lived in the same community, let alone the man in the photograph.

Only the neighbor living behind the Congs recognized Cong Ying and her boyfriend from occasionally exchanging pleasantries with the family. "I looked out my window at 11:45 P.M. last night to see the two fighting right outside the main gate. Their voices got louder and more aggressive as they argued. The girl was covering her face and crying, and I had a feeling something was going to happen..."

Tao Longyue questioned back, "At 11:45 P.M? Why do you remember the time so clearly?"

The man was still in his pajamas and slippers, his hair messy and face full of exhaustion. "The English Premier League—it was Arsenal vs. Chelsea last night. The game started at 11 P.M. sharp, and the argument began the moment the first half of the game finished."

"There's quite some distance between your house and theirs. Are you sure you can see clearly in the middle of the night?" Tao Longyue instinctively felt

this witness wasn't reliable. He looked up at the streetlights surrounding the mansions' yards. The fancy designs were more decorative than functional—not a good fit for transmitting light.

"Of course, how could I not? The girl was dressed in a bright yellow dress yesterday. She stood out more than a two-hundred-watt light bulb." The man didn't seem pleased that he had drawn the police's suspicion; he pouted. "Besides, they live right across from us, how can I not know who my neighbors are?"

Tao Longyue pondered momentarily. "Do you know the name of the man arguing with the deceased girl and where he works?"

"The flower shop delivered roses to the wrong address last time, and they ended up at my doorstep instead of their house. There was a name on there, Shen something... Shen Liufei!" The man yawned. "It was quite a pleasant-sounding name, so I remembered. As for what he does, I have no idea; his face was cold and gloomy. I always knew he was capable of murder..."

After having his say, the man tutted a few more times and walked away; it seemed he'd stayed up all night to watch two whole games and needed to get some sleep. The crowd around them refused to disperse and commented pitifully, wondering how a good family could die such tragic deaths.

"That's the rich for you." Tao Longyue ordered his team to pull the cordon back up and make sure the curious bystanders didn't step over the boundaries. He then turned to Xie Lanshan. "If it wasn't for the murders, these people wouldn't even know they had neighbors like this family for their whole lives."

Xie Lanshan wasn't fazed by the comment. "Did you still think everything was like how it was in the past, when you could rely on your neighbors to save you from an earthquake?"

Of course, this was a throwaway line from Xie Lanshan, but Tao Longyue felt warmed by the mention and gave his friend's shoulder a playful punch.

The night prior around two in the morning, a violent storm—a rare sight within the last decade for the area—had poured down and washed away all evidence outside of Cong Ying's house. As the saying goes, the devil is ten feet tall, while virtue is only one; yet, though the culprit was careful, the on-site investigators were even more scrupulous. After taking photos and collecting fingerprints, they found some traces left behind—a footprint appeared in the garden behind the house. It was a heeled leather shoeprint from a size thirty-six shoe. Judging by how clean the print was, it must have been made after the storm cleared.

The phrase "no murder left unsolved" was no longer trending in modern society, but such a heinous criminal case hadn't occurred in Hanhai City for a long time. After thoroughly checking the crime scene but before they could make their way back to the homicide and violent crime unit, Xie Lanshan and

his team received a call from their higher-ups. The leaders above them were prioritizing the case and demanded the team focus all their resources and energy to solve it in a timely manner.

Tao Longyue let Xie Lanshan drive back to the bureau while he sat on the passenger's side to report their work to his boss. "We've already narrowed in on a suspect, so rest assured that we will be arranging for investigations soon. Though because Old Liang from the municipal bureau is already retired, we might need a profiling artist on our team; can we ask that expert from the US to start early?"

The request was declined.

"Those Americans sure are undisciplined and disorganized," Tao Longyue complained as he hung up. "That so-called expert is taking his sweet time while we're dealing with matters of life and death here. Said he wants to enjoy his time off before starting work."

"I bet he's all looks without brains. He's probably scared of revealing his uselessness and doesn't want to start." Xie Lanshan wasn't in the mood to argue and paused. "Assuming the culprit is that man in the photo, I still don't understand the purpose of arranging the corpses in that manner. He should have quickly cleaned up the evidence and left the site after the murder. And if he did it out of passion or vengeance, there wouldn't be any reason to waste so much effort."

"I don't get it either; was the culprit doing it to distract the police, or does it have some special meaning?" Shaking his head, Tao Longyue fell into deep thought. "Also, that woman's footprint behind the mansion was clearly left after the storm. It must have been about two hours after the murder. Who could she possibly be? Was she an accomplice, or someone with another agenda? Did she also set the surveillance room on fire?"

Still sitting in the back seat, Ding Li suddenly chimed in, her words rolling out of her mouth without a second thought. "I feel like I've seen an image similar to how the corpses at the crime scene were laid."

"That internet forum again?" Xie Lanshan laughed, unable to believe her words.

"No, it's real, but it's not from the forums. I swear I've seen it before..."

"All right." Xie Lanshan's headache finally eased up. "Your big bro doesn't have time to treat you to dinner tonight. I'll make it up to you another day."

"Why's that?"

"Why are you asking why?" Tao Longyue's lips curled downward. In his mind, he groused about newbies with too many questions, then yelled before Xie Lanshan could respond, "Everyone's clocking in for overtime tonight. We're eating in the cafeteria!"

To show their support for the public security policemen who had decided to work overtime, the cafeteria added an extra dish to their menu that day: yellowhead catfish broiled with tofu. The fresh aroma of seafood was overwhelming and strong, spreading outside the room.

The Hanhai City Municipal Bureau's cafeteria was always extra lively whenever a big or hot case came up. "Hot case" was investigator jargon, referring to the first seventy-two hours: the golden hours of solving a crime. The longer the investigation dragged on, the case would gradually become warm, then cold, making it much more difficult to solve. As of now, the violent crime unit of the Hanhai Municipal Bureau had split up into multiple little teams of busy beavers; only Xie Lanshan was left out.

Even though he had been given permission to investigate the crime scene, Tao Jun forbade him from participating in further business.

Tao Jun handed him the card of a therapist at a local psych ward, explaining that the hospital worked with the municipal bureau. He insisted that Xie Lanshan see a therapist if he wanted to participate.

Xie Lanshan hadn't expected Tao Jun to give such an ultimatum. Dumbfounded, he pinched the business card in his hand. The old man knew how to deal with him; nothing aside from a murder could get the young man's blood boiling, so he'd allowed Xie Lanshan to take a step into the case in order to set the bait.

Tao Jun looked at him straight in the eye. "It's your choice."

Xie Lanshan fell silent and played with the card in his hand, considering his options and hesitating. Moments later, the cloud over his face disappeared as he smiled back. "I'll report to the traffic unit tomorrow."

"You want to be stubborn, then let's see which one of us cracks first!"

Tao Jun couldn't fathom why Xie Lanshan so firmly refused to see a therapist and walked away in anger, leaving his son to continue yapping at someone else on the side.

Tao Longyue knew persuasion was useless, so he could only rely on provocation. Deliberately, he put on a steely face. "Solving the murder case is a job for investigators like *us*, but you're a traffic cop now. You direct traffic, uphold the laws, and dole out punishments for breaking regulations. From one public security employee to another, we've each got to stay in our own lanes fulfilling our duties to keep the machine called society running."

Xie Lanshan took a glance at the bolded "Protecting the psychological health of our public security police" on the business card, crushed it into a ball within his fist, and said, "Bullshit."

"Don't worry. You can leave this case to us. We promise to solve it as soon as possible in tribute to your poor traffic cop soul." It wasn't clear whether he was trying to encourage Xie Lanshan or tease him until the end. "The province

recently launched their Hunting Net Operation and requested all municipal bureaus cooperate. You should know about that."

The Hunting Net Operation was a project spearheaded by the Provincial Department of Public Security. Many past cases had gone cold due to the limitations of investigative methodology and technology of the time. The new operation would reopen cold cases and reanalyze them using the latest developments and databases available.

Tao Longyue gave Xie Lanshan's shoulders a pat. "So no need to worry. There's plenty for a traffic cop to do. You might even find a big case by searching those unregistered vehicles crossing the borders."

There was no place for heroes. Xie Lanshan sat alone in the file room with a pile of old cases until midnight.

The stack was filled with old events, like the '98 Hushan Park Murder and the '01 Shunde Residential Community Mass Murder. The earliest case was from at least thirty years ago: the victims were a family matriarch and her eleven-year-old daughter; in total, the two had suffered thirty unique stab wounds from a knife, and the only evidence left at the scene were bloody footprints.

The case was later classified as a robbery-homicide: all cash inside the house had been taken, along with the woman's antique silver necklace.

Back then, they hadn't managed to catch the culprit. Despite being said that karma ultimately judges good and evil, statistics showed less than 50 percent of all criminal cases across multiple countries were fully solved and closed.

Tired of flipping through these old files, Xie Lanshan glanced at the clock. It was already past midnight, but his colleagues were still in overtime. He placed his hands in his pockets and strolled casually out of the municipal bureau by himself.

The late-May nights were chilly; the humidity in the air from the threatening rain still lingered and suffocated him, and the water vapor clung to his body.

(ii)

The night air condensed into mist. Xie Lanshan's home was located on an old street, right in the middle of three districts—the borderland amidst the urban landscape. Everybody's business was nobody's business; no public security branch leaders from the surrounding districts wanted to get involved with the likes of his decrepit street. Failed regulations were a headache to deal with, and even if a successful law enforcement model were enacted in the area, it was unlikely to garner much credit to the enterprising planner. Thus, despite the beautiful surroundings, public security had always been a pressing

concern. Robberies and small crimes were common; even the grass on the roadside was left uncut. Weeds grew freely, unrestrained by the roads and filled with a force of unorganized and uncultivated wild vitality.

On the way home, Xie Lanshan ran into Uncle Tan once again. The old man sold pancakes in the morning and skewers or chili noodle soup at night; the convenience of being a street vendor was doing business anywhere within the city limits.

However, tonight, Uncle Tan chose a place far from the crowds. The gloomy weather in the night added to the slow business, making the vendor look even more deserted than usual. Xie Lanshan found this old man quite the character. Sometimes he would pass by the little vending cart after work and support the small business. Uncle Tan, an affable man, knew Xie Lanshan was the "cat boss" of the community. Thus, he would often give Xie Lanshan extra soft-boiled chicken meat or pork to feed the strays.

Xie Lanshan said, "You should head back soon. It's about to rain."

With a wry smile, Uncle Tan pointed toward a streetlight at the corner. "I noticed the lights were broken, so I wanted to leave some light on for young women who just got off work. The road here is too dark and isolated for them to walk alone at night."

The heavy clouds in the sky hid the moon and starlight; the small lamp on the tiny vendor cart provided the only glow on the otherwise pitch-black street.

As they chatted, a young woman quickly walked toward them. Her racing heart finally relaxed. Seeing Uncle Tan behind the familiar cart, she slowed her footsteps.

A luring aroma wafted from the water inside the boiling pot as Uncle Tan greeted the young woman. "You're half an hour later than usual today."

"The head nurse assigned an urgent task last minute." The young woman walked closer. "Uncle Tan, you used to open up your shop no matter what the weather was like, but you weren't here last night. I was so scared that I couldn't even take this street home!"

The elderly man scratched his head. "Ah, I had stomach trouble yesterday."

Xie Lanshan laughed. Uncle Tan had always been such a kindhearted man. Just how friendly was he? He was like a lamppost, ready to burn through all of his fuel to light up anyone's life. Everyone in the area knew him and would give nothing but a thumbs-up when the old man's name was mentioned.

Once, a middle-aged woman had ten thousand yuan stolen out of her hand right in front of a bank by a thief on a bike. She'd tried to chase after the culprit on her own but tripped over herself, wailing in tears as the thief got away. Uncle Tan pushed his little vendor cart over, crashing right into the bike and shocking the thief into falling. Of course, the thief got up from the ground

and took off, but Old Tan fearlessly chased after the man for at least two whole blocks, even when the thief took out a knife. The old man had somehow managed to hold the thief down until the police came to the rescue.

The money was the life savings the woman had planned to use for her son's kidney surgery. When she saw how Uncle Tan's little cart had been crushed during the pursuit, she insisted on giving the old man five hundred yuan as a tip, feeling indebted. But the old man sternly refused the money. In the end, the police mediated the exchange and the woman awarded Uncle Tan with a silk banner with a golden imprint that read: May this kind heart live a peaceful life.

The night breeze laced with thin drops of rain that fell across the sky was refreshing. Uncle Tan watched the young nurse leave, then turned toward Xie Lanshan with a smile on his face. Despite being poor for his whole life, the old man never seemed to be bothered.

"There were thefts happening around this area. A young woman on a night shift was robbed the other day and almost sexually harassed. I also saw the police cars from your bureau driving around; the news said there was a big case." The old man sighed when Xie Lanshan didn't deny his statement. "Even though this place is a bit out of the way, it's still a cross street. If anything were to happen, I would see it immediately. Unfortunately, I'm going to be leaving soon and only have a few days left to sell some food out here."

Xie Lanshan was a bit surprised. "I didn't hear you mention that during the day. Where are you going?"

The old man was leaving the city. His daughter was doing well in the south and wanted to take her father in.

"When are you leaving?" Xie Lanshan never knew the old man had a daughter; he had always lived a modest life in those cheap rental units by himself.

"Soon, by the end of this week." Uncle Tan's expression turned gloomy. "I've spent almost a decade of my life here, so it feels surreal. It's like I'm losing my home—it's not really pleasant."

He seemed reluctant to leave.

"Spending the rest of your life at ease doesn't sound too bad." Xie Lanshan's lips curled slightly, but he didn't try to persuade this stubborn old man to close up for the day.

As he left, he turned back for one last look. Uncle Tan was over 170 centimeters tall, but his back was curled from the pressures of age, making him appear shorter. Though he had been a laborer when he was young, the old man's figure was quite brutish for his age.

The solitary figure under the lone light was strangely reassuring.

Xie Lanshan returned home, recalled what Ding Li said to him earlier in the day, and thought about searching for the thread about himself and Mu Kun. He sat for five minutes in front of his computer but finally suppressed his curiosity. After typing Mu Kun's name in the search bar, he slowly deleted each letter.

He walked into the bathroom, turned on the cold water, and filled the bathtub.

After taking his clothes off, he inhaled a deep breath and submerged himself once more.

Xie Lanshan had forgotten when he developed this habit. He sank deeper, to the bottom of the bathtub. Underwater, he held his breath tightly and wrestled against himself.

Holding one's breath underwater required some training; one needed to toss all thoughts aside as they withstood the pain, then meditate to search for the truth with an undisturbed focus.

After holding his breath for over five minutes, Xie Lanshan's heart rate decreased significantly, which caused his blood pressure to change dramatically. Yet even in this state, his consciousness was still clear.

Only at the brink of death could he stop thinking about his experiences as an undercover agent. He wouldn't need to think about guns, drugs, overdosed sex workers, or corpses of young people lying on the streets.

In addition, that woman covered in blood who haunted his dreams seemed to have died by Mu Kun's hand.

When he first returned to his post after his undercover work, Xie Lanshan had been in the spotlight of the bureau for a short while. The unit's advertisement and marketing campaign turned the man's experience into a fantasy novel, portraying him as the sharp knife penetrating the toxic den of criminals. More than one production company had approached them, hoping to turn his story into a movie. However, Xie Lanshan didn't feel the glory and honor of returning as a hero, only the lingering fear and perplexity of escaping the depths of hell.

Thanks to the rigid training of the police academy, Xie Lanshan was one of the first undercover cops sent out upon graduation, earning him a reputation in the bureau. He was prudent and dignified, dependable at work, fearless in the line of duty, and quite the master of all trades. He could drive fast, snipe, and fire guns, so he was quickly recognized by Mu Kun and became a minor leader under the drug lord.

In a small town less than three kilometers away from the border of China and Myanmar, Xie Lanshan had once hung out with another of the organization's small-time bosses at a bar. After a few shots of strong booze, an underage girl caught the eye of the drug boss, yet the girl refused his

advances. Amidst the pushing and shoving, another underage boy jumped in, claiming he was a friend of the girl, and denounced the drug lord.

But Mu Kun's underlings were all hyenas. Even if the drug boss still had a bit of courtesy toward the girl, he clearly showed no civility to the young boy dressed like a local gangster. Seeing the boss was ready to take out his gun, Xie Lanshan quickly shoved the gun back into the man's pocket. Then he picked up a wine bottle and slapped it hard against the boy's face.

In truth, he was careful; while the impact certainly was painful, it wasn't a severe injury, nor would it threaten the boy's life.

The drug boss said with a dark expression, "The bottle ain't even broken."

Without another word, Xie Lanshan broke the wine bottle in his hand with his head.

"Piss off!" He turned toward the young boy and spewed out some curses, then back to the drug boss. "Bro, let it go already. A leader shouldn't waste time with these stupid kids. If you really want to vent your anger, I'll be more than happy to spar with you."

The boss looked convinced while he was being supported out toward the door of the bar. However, within two steps of the exit, the boss suddenly grabbed the half-broken wine bottle and viciously stabbed the boy's neck.

The boy didn't have time to react. Staring in disbelief at Xie Lanshan, he fell to the ground.

Police sirens screamed from afar while the drug dealers in the bar scattered like rats.

Only Xie Lanshan remained dumbfounded by the door. After a few seconds, his instincts kicked in. He took off his T-shirt, ripped off a piece of fabric, and tied it around the boy's wound.

The boy clutched tightly to Xie Lanshan's hand, begged, and cried with tears filling his eyes, "Mister... I'm also... I'm also Chinese. Save me..."

The artery on the left side of his neck was cut open, and the blood pouring out of the boy's mouth spilled over Xie Lanshan's face.

The drug boss yelled from behind, "Xie Lanshan! Do you fucking want to be caught? What are you doing?!"

But Xie Lanshan didn't move. He raised the boy's left arm over his head, using a special bandage method and all of his force to press on the boy's vertebra.

But the bleeding didn't stop. The boy's eyes lost focus; his breathing slowed to the brink of stopping.

A bullet from a cop's gun flew by Xie Lanshan's ear. The other drug lord pushed him into the car and yelled, "You fool, he's already dead!"

"I didn't know you were such a damn saint!" After escaping the police cars' pursuit, the drug boss pressed the tip of his gun to Xie Lanshan's forehead,

glaring at him. He clenched his teeth and forced out a line, “If Mu Kun didn’t request to see you, I would’ve shot you dead by now.”

Xie Lanshan didn’t speak, his body covered in blood. He had already grown used to staying silent during times like these.

“I don’t get it—why does Boss Mu want to see him?” another drug dealer in the same car questioned.

“He can fight—and he’s good.” At the end of the day, the drug boss still valued talent. “He could hide in the rain forest for three hours without moving even if his whole body was covered in ants. Then he could turn and take on three special force cops at once; tell me, could a bastard like you do the same?”

“He can fight?” The drug dealer snorted in response. “More like he’s got a pretty face.”

Thus, Xie Lanshan was taken to an impromptu meeting with Mu Kun, who flourished an ornate saber in his left hand before Xie Lanshan’s eyes. The drug lord slashed behind himself, slicing through the throat of a woman without a word. He was left-handed, and the act was clean and swift—clearly done by someone who was skilled with blades.

The woman stood less than a meter away from Xie Lanshan.

Mu Kun gently licked the fresh blood on the blade and sheathed the sword. Then he wrapped an arm carefully around Xie Lanshan’s waist, pressed his face to the latter’s ear, and said with a warm breath of air, “I heard you tried to save someone like this yesterday. Look, isn’t that effort all a waste now?”

The woman was a local opium farmer with a grudge against Mu Kun. The man never gave an explanation for killing her. Her death may have merely been a threat to show his absolute authority over Xie Lanshan, or simply because the man found pleasure in such grotesque entertainment.

Ironically, the heartless killer Mu Kun took a liking to this undercover agent. Even when people had already suspected Xie Lanshan’s identity, the drug lord refused to acknowledge the rumors.

Xie Lanshan could still remember Mu Kun pinching his chin softly, saying half-jokingly, “There’s a mole in your antidrug force.”

Unfazed, Xie Lanshan denied the statement with a straight face. “Are you talking about our national antidrug force? Which provincial unit are you talking about, or do you mean a city branch’s team?”

Mu Kun was a sly and paranoid man; he dug up the entire history of anyone he wanted to hire and even probed his subordinates numerous times after taking them on. Xie Lanshan knew the more secrets he kept, the more likely he’d be suspected, so he never hid that his father had been an antidrug officer—nor did he hide being expelled from the police academy.

“My father used to love making friends with the people in your country’s police department. It was a convenient way to send the goods over the border, but that connection broke off when he died.” Luckily, Mu Kun was simply provoking Xie Lanshan again and revealed another secret. “I’m still investigating right now, but I plan on giving you a present. I will let you know the real cause of your father’s death.”

Mu Kun told Xie Lanshan his father’s antidrug force had a mole, which they nicknamed the “Apostle.” However, Mu Kun never had the chance to solve the case because Xie Lanshan sold him out. During a joint antidrug operation by the US, China, and Myanmar, the drug lord’s forces were annihilated and the man himself vanished from the world.

As he recalled the past while the water still weighed above his head, Xie Lanshan instinctively touched the bullet on the necklace around his neck. His hand clenched until the veins on the back of his hand popped and spread across his arm like a vine. Then the muscles in his body tightened as he held his strange posture.

He opened his eyes underwater; the light in his gaze glistened in the dark.

If the rain really was to fall tonight, the weather would finally warm up into summer.

(iii)

The weather was abnormal. It was supposed to be the transitional period between spring and summer, with mild rain and sunshine. Cold storms had still frequented the city for the last two days, yet as the sun peeked out from the clouds, the temperature rose like a kitchen oven.

At noon, the sun hung high in the sky as heat waves struck the streets.

Stuck behind a train track, Tao Longyue’s chrome-gold Volkswagen glistened brightly under the sun, an almost obnoxious stab to the naked eye.

He opened the window as he waited for the train to pass only to be greeted to a face full of hot air.

On the passenger side, Xie Lanshan gazed out the window. His expression was focused as his eyes squinted, yet his lips were curled up at a slight angle into a faint smile.

The small dimple on his left cheek was easy to miss unless one looked closely.

“Hey, talk to me a bit about that murder case in the Jing Jiang Grand Garden again.” Tao Longyue turned his head toward Xie Lanshan and stared before poking at the other man’s face. He teased, “Quite handsome you are, lad. I didn’t even notice that you have a dimple.”

Xie Lanshan answered without moving his gaze, “A captain is busy with cases every day. Of course you wouldn’t notice details about your subordinates.”

Tao Longyue, on the other hand, decided he wasn’t inattentive. Rather, pre-undercover Xie Lanshan had too much of a poker face; he’d rarely smiled. Considering his face remained emotionless for all 365 days of the year, of course Tao Longyue wouldn’t have noticed something so trivial as a dimple.

Xie Lanshan’s eyes were locked on a pair of young parents with a round little boy who stood between them. The child seemed to be about three or four years old. He was quite a playful soul who didn’t like to walk properly and clung to his parents, hoping they would drag him along.

Tao Longyue sighed. “If you didn’t get shipped off to Mu Kun’s side and saddled by all those rumors, maybe you’d have a kid by now.”

Despite his reputation, Tao Longyue was quite a sentimental man. He used to gift little presents to the prettiest girl in class from the time he was in kindergarten, building himself a long list of women he’d pursued. Xie Lanshan was the exact opposite, and almost naturally immune to romance. The only relationship he’d had with the opposite sex never made it to hand-holding and ended when Xie Lanshan had been sent to do undercover work.

The man would be nearing thirty after this year, and his future was definitely weighing on Tao Jun’s mind. Tao Longyue understood his father’s concern but he was a gossiper; he asked, “So, have you met anyone lately? By the way, this isn’t coming from me—the old man’s concerned about your personal life.”

The strange comment somehow reminded Xie Lanshan of the person he’d met in the movie theater the other day; that shallow dimple grew more visible as his smile widened slightly. Xie Lanshan hadn’t heard the second sentence. “Yeah, I did run into a pretty interesting person.”

Tao Longyue immediately followed up with, “Is she pretty?”

Xie Lanshan’s mind wasn’t on the conversation. “Not too bad.”

Suddenly, the little boy tripped and cried out on the street. He reached an arm toward his father asking to be picked up only to be scolded. His father told him boys ought not to cry and needed to learn to stand up by themselves.

Within an instant, the past flashed before Xie Lanshan’s eyes—he could almost feel his tears gathering as he remembered his old Xie.

His hand reached up subconsciously to touch the necklace around his neck.

This was the bullet shot through old Xie’s back and later dug out from the lifeless heart of his cold corpse.

After a long horn, the train finally sped past. The traffic light changed colors. Since Xie Lanshan was banned from continuing the investigation, Tao Longyue could only steal photos of the scene and the autopsy report from the

bureau to secretly analyze with the man.

"The time of death is confirmed to be between 11:30 P.M. to 12:30 A.M. Cong Ying's boyfriend Shen Liufei had been caught in a heated argument with the young woman at 11:45 P.M. by the neighbors. According to the gate security, he then left Jing Jiang Grand Garden at around 3:00 A.M. Judging by the times, he is very likely to have committed the crime. In my initial analysis, I've concluded that this case is not the work of a single person, and the culprit had a female accomplice. The accomplice set the surveillance room on fire for him around 2:30 A.M. and is very likely the woman who left the footprint in the Cong family's backyard."

Xie Lanshan's eyes narrowed, and he remained silent.

"Also, the cause of death for all the victims was as the forensic science division had initially concluded from the crime scene, but there is one thing." Tao Longyue paused slightly before he continued, "After dissecting Cong Ying's corpse, they discovered internal bruising of her neck area that wasn't outwardly visible. There are two possible explanations: either the culprit used the palm of their hand or their forearm to choke the victim, which makes it harder to leave a mark, as the force is spread over a larger surface area. The second possibility..."

"The second possibility," Xie Lanshan finished the sentence for him, "is the culprit loosened their grip before they bruised her."

Tao Longyue nodded in agreement. "But why would they do that? Choke and stab the victim?"

Xie Lanshan tossed the question back at him. "Then have you thought about Cong Ying's seventeen visible injuries? The second stab went right into her chest, deep enough for a fatal blow, so why did they stab her fifteen more times after?"

"Most of the time it's to release anger," Tao Longyue answered based on his experience. "So the culprit is someone holding a deep grudge against the victim."

"No, at least that's not entirely correct." Xie Lanshan added, "The culprit had a love-hate relationship with Cong Ying."

The traffic light was on the brink of turning red ahead, so Tao Longyue pressed on the gas pedal and shot through the cross street. "How so?"

"Choking someone with your bare hands is a more intimate act than using a weapon. When the culprit is a family member or the case is a sexual assault, victims tend to die by choking and asphyxiation." Xie Lanshan took out a front-facing photo of the deceased. "Look at the photo again and analyze the pale marks on the corpse; what positions were the victim and culprit in when Cong Ying was killed?"

“I’ve seen that already.” Tao Longyue focused on driving. “Her shoulders were stretched out. The outside of her legs bore marks similar to sexual assault, but the autopsy showed the young woman hadn’t been violated.”

“The culprit choked Cong Ying with their hands the first time they tried to commit the crime but let go after a short while because they still hesitated. Yet, their vengeance won out, and the culprit quickly stabbed her to death with a kitchen knife. So, my theory is if the culprit of this case isn’t the man in the photo, it must be someone who has complicated relationships with the deceased.” Xie Lanshan’s earlier sternness quickly lightened. “Of course, these are merely thoughts from a traffic cop. You can decide if you want to take it seriously or not.”

Tao Longyue had heard Little Liang and his crew were searching Cong Ying’s WeChat history right now. They should find some clues on that Shen Liufei person.

And, speak of the devil—Ding Li’s call came in right then. Tao Longyue couldn’t answer the phone, so he put it on speaker. Before Xie Lanshan could speak, the girl on the other side of the line said, “Captain Tao, is Senior Xie in your car right now?”

“Yeah, he is.”

“You know this is against the boss’s rules. We’ve agreed we can’t let him join in this case.”

“Don’t try and start a fight.” Tao Longyue then paused and added in concern, “And don’t tell on me. Xie Lanshan and I are bros. Aside from when we’re taking a dump, we spend all of our free time together.”

With a chuckle, Xie Lanshan chimed in on the conversation, “Ding Li, report what you guys found first.”

The playful tone in Ding Li’s voice disappeared. “We’ve searched Cong Ying’s office already and questioned her friends. She left her old workplace recently and had just been hired at her new office, so her colleagues and friends all said they’ve never seen the man in the photo. Cong Ying had always been quite reserved and introverted, and with her busy schedule of classes, she rarely talked about her personal relationships with others.”

Xie Lanshan asked, “You said classes—what was she taking?”

Ding Li responded, “An open-enrollment art class hosted by the Crane Museum, free for citizens of the city. The course has a total of ten sessions, twice a week; the course is about art appreciation and includes seminars and live drawing from professional artists.”

Tao Longyue was baffled. “Aren’t these classes usually reserved for low-income children?”

Ding Li clicked her tongue. “Perhaps that was the original intention for designing the course, but the teacher the Crane Museum hired isn’t any

random person. The students are teenage girls to women in their early twenties. Every class is filled."

"One of your people." Tao Longyue gave Xie Lanshan a long and almost judging look, but the latter didn't respond.

"Also, you can find it on the official website of the Crane Museum." Ding Li paused slightly. "The art teacher the museum hired is called Shen Liufei."

(iv)

Tao Longyue had been ready to search for clues when one came knocking on his door. He quickly checked the operating hours of the Crane Museum on his phone. A class taught by one Shen Liufei just so happened to be taking place that day. Tao Longyue raised a brow at Xie Lanshan; the scar beside his brow bone also jumped up with the gesture. "Can't ask for a better opportunity. Shall we go?"

He didn't give Xie Lanshan a chance to object and made a violent U-turn as he sped toward their destination.

Another wave of hot air blew in while Xie Lanshan leaned his head back on the passenger seat and closed his eyes. "Drive faster."

His hand pressed on the bullet by his chest as the car shook slightly on the road; his heartbeat gradually caught on to the same rhythm.

When they passed by the bureau, Tao Longyue stepped on the brake, looked around momentarily until his eyes lit up, and announced he needed to collect an autopsy report.

Xie Lanshan didn't get out of the car. He knew this rascal was using the investigation as an excuse to do something questionable and simply knocked on the window to remind Tao Longyue, "I'll give you two minutes."

Su Mansheng was walking toward the front gate of the bureau with another female officer. Before either of them could step out, the doctor suddenly took the female officer's shoulder, pulled her in close, and gently helped fix the collar on her uniform. Su Mansheng was already quite tall—about 176 centimeters in height—and looked even taller now in her leather heels. The female officer, who had abruptly been pulled into the doctor's embrace, was a small bird.

"Watch your clothes and uniform," Su Mansheng reminded the female officer kindly.

Doctor Su was an ever-intimidating woman of few smiles. Her fearsome demeanor often scared people off the moment she spoke, yet Su Mansheng's scolding was much gentler and caring toward the small female officer before her. She lowered her head slightly and relaxed the furrow of her brow, showing a rare warmth.

Witnessing this scene, Xie Lanshan blew out a light whistle.

Tao Longyue quickly walked toward Su Mansheng; he didn't even need Xie Lanshan's reminder and knew from the sound. No words needed to be spoken because he knew it meant, *Sorry, bro, she's not into the opposite gender.*

As she saw Tao Longyue, Su Mansheng spoke up in a businesslike tone. "The forensic analysis report will be sent out within the legal deadline, and we've already informed the investigation division of the new autopsy findings. You surely did not need to personally make a trip here, Captain Tao."

The autopsy report came in quite quickly. The case wasn't too complicated, and the corpses had been discovered early; in addition, the culprit hadn't purposely inflicted injuries on the corpses to distract the forensic science division.

Captain Tao had a whole stockpile of good lines he had prepared to impress the doctor, only to be shooed away before he could even speak a word.

"Hey, Xie Lanshan." Su Mansheng turned slightly toward the man sitting in the car with his imaginary popcorn, ready to watch the showdown.

Wearing a dashing smile, Xie Lanshan poked his head out of the window. "Can I help you?"

Su Mansheng examined him not with the playful gaze of opposite sexes checking each other out, but with a sharp eye more like a predator studying its prey. Her lip lifted into a smile. "I don't look at you because you're not my type."

Xie Lanshan was startled, then realized his comment was coming back to bite him. That unreliable "theory" he had about the doctor's sexuality had already been exposed to the person in question. Rubbing his nose, he put on an innocent grin to wash the awkwardness off his face. "Well, that's unfortunate."

After a short exchange, Su Mansheng removed her gaze from Xie Lanshan and turned toward Tao Longyue, then ordered the homicide and violent crime unit captain almost half-forcefully, "Ask me out after you solve this case."

It was about a three-hour drive from the bureau to the museum one-way, excluding traffic.

The whole trip, Tao Longyue had been in high spirits, humming old tunes of Jacky Cheung he still listened to. In his eyes, Su Mansheng's reaction disproved the assumption she was a lesbian; more importantly, he wasn't pining one-sidedly.

In contrast, Xie Lanshan leaned back in the passenger seat, exhaustion written all over his face like he was having a stomachache. He grumbled for a while in his seat. "Good looks, but poor taste."

The Crane Museum was located in the western suburbs of Hanhai City, near the border and the city's westward neighbor. The privately owned museum

without much traffic didn't boast a bountiful collection, but every piece on display was certainly a rare treasure on its own. Naturally, word of mouth worked better than commercial advertising to drive interest. Ever since its opening, the museum had seen no lack of young artists and collectors.

From the location, the museum clearly wasn't built for the sake of making a profit—but to satiate the hobby of a rich man. The western suburb was a historical mass grave site during the war; legend had it Japanese troops tossed all the dead bodies there after three days and nights of a brutal massacre. It was later repurposed into a factory and went through various stages of remodeling, yet the eerie aura still lingered.

Xie Lanshan couldn't remember which news outlet he had heard the report from, but the Crane Museum had an annual investment of thirty million yuan. However, the owner had remained a mystery and never showed their face in public.

The Crane Museum was neither fancy nor modern in design, and the most eye-catching detail was the grounds surrounding it. Two diamond-shaped buildings connected to each other where their sides met, while the main architecture's exterior was decorated with solemn and antique red bricks and white marble. The secondary building was more laid-back in design and concealed amidst nature, creating an ideal place to hide from the summer heat.

By the time Xie Lanshan arrived, the museum was near its closing hours. A group of bubbly young women walking out of the building greeted them. As they left class, the words "Mr. Shen" popped up frequently in their chitchat.

The museum only allowed people to exit at this time, no more entries. After the chatty girls walked a fair distance away, Tao Longyue gave Xie Lanshan a look and took out his ID. He intended to show their police badges to walk through the front gate, but Xie Lanshan didn't want to startle the prey until he took a look at the target.

Tao Longyue stared up at the main building of the museum with a difficult expression. The ground floor was almost as tall as a two-story residential complex. The outer wall of the main building was constructed from smooth marble along the bottom half and red brick overhead, creating an artificial cliff that was impossible for the average person to climb.

However, rock climbing with his bare hands was a piece of cake to Xie Lanshan. He jumped and grabbed the rough edges of the bricks, then pulled his whole body up with his arm and swiftly ascended to the second floor of the museum.

Fortunately, no one witnessed this scene. Maintaining his dignity as the homicide and violent crime unit captain, Tao Longyue remained on the ground. Xie Lanshan leaned out of the window of the second floor and gestured, slightly annoyed, for his partner to come up.

Tao Longyue clicked his tongue, clenched his teeth, and then finally climbed. He took a little longer than Xie Lanshan, but the fit policeman that he was, he still managed to reach the second floor successfully.

Tao Longyue arched his back forward and held his hands on his knees as he panted from exhaustion. Shaking his head, Xie Lanshan shot a look at the other man and tutted under his breath.

Yet before they could even step into the exhibit hall, Captain Tao dropped the ball once again. He whined about a stomachache and needing to go to the restroom.

"Rubbish excuses." Xie Lanshan held back the urge to roll his eyes. "Hurry up."

While Tao Longyue dashed away to relieve himself, Xie Lanshan took a stroll inside the enormous museum. It was deserted save for him.

The interior was designed mostly of wood, with strange corridors that took various twists and turns, creating a unique and creative structure. Xie Lanshan's footsteps echoed in the vast space. Even during daytime, natural light barely illuminated the museum; during dusk, the building took on an even eerier and darker atmosphere.

He quickly made his way to the area temporarily closed to the public and noticed some splashes of red paint on the floor. Kneeling, Xie Lanshan checked to make sure it wasn't blood before walking deeper into the hallway. Strangely shaped art pieces were scattered haphazardly inside; with the classic black-and-white palette, it looked like an exhibition themed after darkness—but one still in the process of being set up.

A door hid in the shadows.

Xie Lanshan pushed it open, and a single bloody composition jumped out amidst the monochrome space.

A bathtub, a woman, and a floor filled with fresh blood. The painting was almost identical to the scene in his dreams.

Xie Lanshan suddenly felt himself overcome by a loss of breath, like thousands of hands were squeezing him from all different directions.

After finally managing to pry his gaze away, another even more visually disturbing image came into his sight—the same naked bodies, the same chopped-off hands, the same circular, ritualistic layout of corpses. Even the Sanskrit writing on the lower abdomen of the girl in the middle was exactly the same.

This painting faithfully recorded the Cong family's mass murder. A signature at the bottom right corner revealed the painting's author and age: Shen Liufei, painted ten years ago.

The painting he had seen earlier was clearly from the same series, sharing the theme of murder. Both paintings were primarily red, creating a horrifically

outlandish visual to leave a powerful impact on the viewer. Yet this series had a strangely soothing and Zen-like name: *The Brink of Light and Dark*.

Cong Ying's shelf, which Xie Lanshan had taken an extra look at during the day of the investigation, had a book also titled *The Brink of Light and Dark*. The strange way the book was placed on the shelf had stood out like a sore thumb.

Both works shared the same creator—they were both by Shen Liufei.

Noticing someone was walking toward him, Xie Lanshan's first instinct was that it must be Tao Longyue. "Hey, Tao, bro, check out this painting. The name—"

He stopped abruptly, and the person halted at the door. It wasn't Tao Longyue.

"The name comes from a poem by poet Shi Zhengjue of the Song dynasty, 'The Hymn for the Zen Man's Union with His Master.'" The man behind him followed up the unfinished sentence, "A petite kettle of nature can expand to the skies and earth; a rotten game of tactics can resolve at *the brink of light and dark*."

The voice was deep and soft but also familiar; it belonged to the interesting person whom he had met at the movie theater that night.

The corner of his lips curling up slightly, Xie Lanshan turned around to welcome this unexpected encounter.

Despite having some expectations, Xie Lanshan was still quite shocked the moment their eyes met. The man before him was tall and could meet his gaze at eye level when standing upright. His face was fair and handsome in a way impossible to describe with words, but he also looked incredibly young. If the man wasn't wearing a proper suit, Xie Lanshan would have almost sworn the person before him was still a student.

Yet it seemed the man didn't remember Xie Lanshan at all from his cold and distant gaze.

"The museum is closed." The man gently and courteously knocked on the door, then his clean fingers pointed at the sign taped there: "Off-limits to non-staff."

"I'm here to look for someone." Xie Lanshan refused to expose his identity, instead diverting the man's attention.

"Oh?" The man's gaze was sharp and suspicious, yet his lips still maintained a slight upward curvature, almost as if he had already seen through the cop's lies but, out of personal dignity, gave the man a chance to explain himself anyway.

"I'm here to look for my cousin, Shen Liufei." Xie Lanshan gave a wide grin that could rob the hearts of many. Utilizing his good looks, he made himself look sincere, trustworthy, and harmless. "He teaches classes here."

“Is that so?” The man chuckled the same laugh from the movie theater: slightly mocking but still courteous and cold. “I’m Shen Liufei.”

(v)

The playful tone in Xie Lanshan’s voice vanished the moment this name came out. His brows furrowed and his eyes narrowed, sharply studying the man before him.

Shen Liufei stood his ground, unfazed. His ink-black eyes turned to capture that wary gaze while maintaining the faint smile.

A loud police siren suddenly rang out. Within less than a minute, Tao Longyue ran over and called out to Xie Lanshan from afar, “Hey, a-Lan, I found a five-inch-long fruit knife in the restroom and a pair of burnt human hands!”

Once he walked closer, Tao Longyue realized the mood was off. He stared at the two men soundlessly facing each other in a hostile stalemate, and asked Xie Lanshan, “What’s going on?”

Xie Lanshan’s gaze was still fixed on the man. His lips moved slightly. “This is Shen Liufei.”

“Oh, snap, the painting!” Tao Longyue’s gaze quickly turned to the space behind Xie Lanshan. He gasped in surprise when he discovered the artwork.

The remains and murder weapon inside the museum, a painting depicting the Cong family’s murder scene, and the man in question, said by all the neighbor witnesses to have been in a complicated relationship with one of the victims... this tall and handsome man before them, Shen Liufei, matched their profile of the murder suspect.

Immediately, Tao Longyue pulled out his police badge and walked toward Shen Liufei, his voice stern and harsh. “I’m the municipal bureau’s homicide and violent crime division main unit Captain Tao Longyue. I am now verbally ordering you to answer the bureau’s summons to come with us and assist in the investigation of a mass murder case.”

He no longer displayed warmth or kindness as he did toward the civilians he served. Captain Tao had spent years on the front lines dealing with criminals and knew how to maintain his authority before a suspect. His expression, which complemented the hard lines on his face, was almost electrifying to look at. It intimidated most people, but it didn’t affect Shen Liufei.

“Right. The Article 117 of the Criminal Procedure Law added a new clause to require verbal summons when facing active criminals.” Despite having the police arrive at his doorstep and being taken in as a suspect, Shen Liufei still sounded calm and collected, “Similarly, the law also defines seven situations

that constitute an individual as an active criminal or major suspect in the eyes of the court. Captain, can you please explain which of the requirements I meet?"

Tao Longyue was speechless; he had failed to scare off the man and instead received an unexpected rebuff. Most suspects would have followed them along to the bureau; he hadn't expected to run into someone who understood the laws so thoroughly.

"If I am merely a witness, the only authority that can demand me to attend a hearing is the court. If I'm a suspect, then please bring an arrest warrant before coming in next time." Shen Liufei was ready to leave. "I have an appointment to get to, so if you'll excuse me."

Xie Lanshan's stare finally shifted subconsciously toward that painting of the woman in blood above his head. Like firecrackers exploding, vertigo triggered by Shen Liufei suddenly consumed him.

Enduring the pain, he called out to the man, "Wait."

The moment Shen Liufei's footsteps stopped and the man turned, Xie Lanshan's fist swung out.

Street fighting and sparring had been staples during their days training in the police academy; Tao Longyue and Xie Lanshan would often exchange a few punches when they were bored. The former maintained a record of more losses than wins, but Tao Longyue knew Xie Lanshan was quite the fighter and considered a top dog within the municipal bureau. He didn't expect that Shen Liufei was also not bad himself.

Shen Liufei's whole body darted out like an arrow shot from a bow, but Xie Lanshan was faster. The cop reached for his target's wrist, hoping to twist it behind the other man's back and to force the suspect to leave with him.

As his finger touched the suspect's arm, Xie Lanshan was surprised. Painting was a delicate job, but the muscle he felt was as stiff as iron and almost as strong and sinewy as a cop like himself.

When Xie Lanshan's fingers gripped his forearm, Shen Liufei turned his wrist and forced it out of the cop's restraints.

Xie Lanshan chased the man down once again, but Shen Liufei blocked him dexterously. Xie Lanshan didn't manage to hold down the man successfully, instead only managing to pull a button from the artist's collared shirt.

At the same time, the two men both took a few steps back and kept a safe distance from each other; their glares seemed to spark flames in the thin air between them.

Xie Lanshan finally noticed Shen Liufei's tattoo. An extremely obnoxious design, like some sort of phoenix or mythological bird, stretched from the left of his neck down to his chest, perhaps even extending down his whole arm. It

resembled a totem.

The tattoo was ruddy, like the color of peach flowers; different shades of red and pink blended together on the snow-white skin in an almost alluring but beautiful form.

Shen Liufei looked down at his ripped shirt and exposed tattoo. Frowning, he turned to Xie Lanshan and said in his usual calm tone, “This is a little too passionate for our first meeting.”

Tao Longyue finally caught the inappropriate gesture. “A-Lan, what are you doing?”

“He refused the summons, so we’ll just have to summon him by force.” Xie Lanshan cracked his wrist and knuckles. The crisp sounds of his bones rang out in the room. Ignoring Tao Longyue, the man gave Shen Liufei a slightly mischievous grin and said with a playful pout, “Hey, big cuz, you should just come with your baby brother.”

(vi)

Tao Longyue might have been a blockhead at times, but he was still sharp. He could tell Shen Liufei was no average suspect. In fear Xie Lanshan would complicate things even more by causing trouble, he called out, “Xie Lanshan, stop!”

Before the last syllable could drop, Xie Lanshan charged forward again with an explosive side kick to Shen Liufei’s head. The latter raised an arm to block the impact. His muscles tensed as he nullified the attack, but Xie Lanshan’s kick was too strong and forced him to take a step back, which Xie Lanshan took as an opportunity to strike with his elbow. Both men displayed amazing physical combat abilities with clean movements, exchanging punches and kicks tit for tat. Neither could take the other down.

Completely dumbfounded by the scene, Tao Longyue forgot to stop the fight. The sounds of the sparring lured in some curious onlookers.

Xie Lanshan, insistent on capturing the suspect, threw out blow after blow; Shen Liufei saw through the charges and blocked them all, suppressing each move. After exchanging a few rounds, the two men locked their arms tightly until they were only a narrow distance apart. The force of their waists pushed each other into a stalemate. During this confrontation, Xie Lanshan suddenly lifted an eyebrow, perked up his lips, and pressed his face forward to kiss the other on the mouth.

Shen Liufei had noticed Xie Lanshan’s red and full lips, but he had never expected this man would do something so shameless, unfathomable, or bold.

The cold and expressionless face finally showed the hint of change; Shen Liufei instinctively took a step back.

Taking this brief opening, Xie Lanshan freed up a hand, reached out with the handcuffs from his waist, and caught Shen Liufei's right wrist.

Realizing he wouldn't be able to catch the other hand in time, Xie Lanshan quickly secured the second cuff around his own left wrist.

A crisp click signaled the end of the brief confrontation.

"I'm not one to shy from using deceit." Xie Lanshan raised his left hand and shook the handcuff, shooting a sly but lazy grin at Shen Liufei. "I call this dragging you out by the hand."

Shen Liufei glanced at the handcuff on his wrist and said without a hint of anger, "This sure escalated."

It wasn't a square win, but regardless, it was still a victory for the cops. The crowd of spectators included staff from the museum and the recently arrived police. Xie Lanshan pulled Shen Liufei, now cuffed to him, out through the crowd. Like a peacock displaying its feathers, he strutted proudly with a ray of bright light in his eyes. Shen Liufei, surprisingly cooperative, allowed himself to be escorted out of the Crane Museum and into Tao Longyue's golden Volkswagen by Xie Lanshan without any qualms.

Tao Longyue drove to the municipal bureau while the other two sat in the back seat.

The sun was setting between two skyscrapers like an egg yolk tossed into a container slowly sinking to the bottom. Xie Lanshan gave Shen Liufei some curious looks, but the latter still showed no sign of anger. He only stared coolly at the back of Tao Longyue's head, carrying a hint of a smile on the corner of his lips.

Xie Lanshan was puzzled. "What are you smiling about?"

"How ugly this car is," Shen Liufei said mildly. "Also, you'll be crying soon."

After triumphantly taking the man back to the municipal bureau, Xie Lanshan realized this line wasn't merely a bluff. The man certainly had business to attend to. What's more, it was with the branch chief of the municipal bureau. While it was unclear whether this was a meeting to discuss the Cong family murder case or a private gathering between friends, Xie Lanshan had ruined the appointment.

Tao Longyue was baffled; the renowned forensic sketch artist everyone had been talking about was this finely dressed murder suspect—Shen Liufei.

Now that the man was there, they still needed to go through proper procedures. While the chief scolded Xie Lanshan, Tao Longyue began questioning Shen Liufei in the inquiry room. His eyebrows pressed together, he spoke sternly and aggressively, leaving no room for negotiation.

Tao Longyue asked, "What's your relationship with Cong Ying?"

Shen Liufei answered, "She was one of my students."

“More than one witness said that your relationship with her was quite unusual. It was... a little fishy.”

“I’m naturally attracted to people’s negative emotions, so I was closer to her than others.” Shen Liufei lifted an eyebrow slightly, his expression unfathomable, as if he was asking, *And you call this fishy?*

Tao Longyue momentarily paused in thought. “You mentioned negative emotions earlier. So what exactly does this young woman have in her that can be defined as such?”

“She once tried to jump off the building of the Crane Museum until I stopped her.” Shen Liufei paused momentarily before continuing, “Her family objected to her potential marriage to her boyfriend. She also suffered from sexual harassment at work and wanted to expose it but instead was threatened and stalked for trying to speak out.”

“Boyfriend?” Tao Longyue immediately pulled out the photo from the file folder and placed it before Shen Liufei. “Have you seen the man standing beside Cong Ying in this photo?”

“Never.” As if he knew what the next question would be, Shen Liufei added, “But I do know he founded a company that designs escape rooms, and they are working on a new one right now.”

Tao Longyue’s eyes lit up; this fresh clue could finally paint a picture of the primary suspect profiled for the case. Regardless, it wasn’t enough to eliminate Shen Liufei as a potential suspect. “The time of the murder was between 11:30 P.M. on the seventh and 12:30 A.M. on the eighth, which is the night before yesterday. Can you explain what you were doing during the time of the crime?”

“I was watching a movie in a theater—a double feature.”

Tao Longyue couldn’t believe him. “You watch movies in the middle of the night all by yourself? Can anyone prove your alibi?”

As though he thought that was an awfully silly question, Shen Liufei chuckled. “There are surveillance cameras in the theaters, usually placed right in front of the screen to face the audience—I like watching my movies from the first row.”

“You sure have a lot of weird hobbies and interests,” Tao Longyue sneered, then turned to another police officer beside him who was recording the questioning. “Hey, Li’l Liang, go send a notice down to retrieve the surveillance footage from the movie theater.”

Shen Liufei took a sip of the cheap English breakfast tea placed on the table and felt it wasn’t up to standard—a touch too bitter. Placing the disposable cup back on the table, he faintly smiled. “Captain Tao, it’s one thing to have such an awful taste in tea, but you really should reconsider your taste in cars.”

This man was an oddball; despite his polite and easygoing appearance, a certain bit of arrogance and conceit seemed to be etched into his soul. It wasn't abhorrent or reprehensible and instead often made others doubt themselves upon contact. Tao Longyue felt uneasy around Shen Liufei; the man's gaze was deep and sharp, ready to pierce right through anyone looking at him. Yet remembering how the man was so uncooperative in the museum, he couldn't help but grow somewhat frustrated. "You could've mentioned everything earlier, so we didn't have to actually take you down."

"Those are our country's laws," Shen Liufei said. "Citizens have no obligation to prove their innocence voluntarily if it incriminates oneself."

"Laws of 'our' country?" Recalling that his old man had mentioned this person was a professional from abroad, Tao Longyue questioned him dubiously, "What, so you didn't apply for US Citizenship? You're still legally Chinese?"

"I *was* Chinese?" Shen Liufei grinned slightly. "I am still Chinese now and forever will be."

Finally out of questions to ask, Tao Longyue began pondering whether he should let the man go, when someone on Shen Liufei's side called. The visitor didn't even bother showing up in person, instead opting to make the entire Hanhai City Municipal Bureau jump out of their seats by calling in through the speaker.

The appointment Shen Liufei had wasn't just with the leaders of the municipal bureau—he also was meeting with the famous criminal defense lawyer Fu Yunxian.

Tao Jun answered the call. Despite working in public security for virtually all his life, he had only met Fu Yunxian a total of three times during his career; each ended on a rather unhappy note, leaving memories he would rather not look back on. Under customary circumstances, if Fu Yunxian defeated the prosecutor's office, the blame would sit on the shoulders of the public security division for their negligence in conducting an investigation that allowed the defendant's lawyers to find loopholes in the law.

Now that the lawyer had called in, Tao Jun had no choice but to personally set Shen Liufei free.

Tao Jun had first encountered the forensic sketch artist around seven or eight years ago but never face-to-face, as they were always separated by the Pacific Ocean. The contact between the two had been limited to emails regarding complex criminal cases. The moment he saw Shen Liufei, the old man was dumbstruck and only came back to his senses a few seconds after. "I didn't realize... you were so young, Mr. Shen."

So surprised was he that he even began to suspect the "Mr. Shen" he had communicated with so courteously many years ago might have been a mere

child who wasn't even as tall as himself.

Lifting his gaze from Tao Longyue, Shen Liufei lightly greeted Captain Tao Jun.

When Tao Longyue saw his wrinkled and wizened old man refer to a clean-shaven young boy with such respect without so much as an acknowledgment from the latter, he grew even more upset. He almost wanted to take Xie Lanshan's lead and start another round of "exercise."

By the time Shen Liufei was signing papers to complete his release procedures, Xie Lanshan was still being scolded by Tao Jun. "How many times is this now? Since when did you become so bullheaded, so flippant, so..." The old man wasn't highly educated and only managed to dig out an appropriate word from his limited vocabulary after a long while: *unhinged*.

"You were never this crazy in the past." Tao Jun was growing anxious. "Shooting that meat seller already caused so much trouble for us. If someone else sues us for illegally using arms and extreme measures, you can take off your uniform for good!"

Tao Longyue didn't realize how serious this could be. "What, really? But wasn't this how we used to handle cases in the past?"

"That nonsense again, you little shit?!" the old man yelled back at the younger Tao with rage clear on his face.

Tao Jun explained that the branch chief had been standing beside Fu Yunxian earlier and clearly heard him say, "Xie Lanshan? That police officer that made the headlines? How is he still in the homicide and violent crime unit?"

Then the famed lawyer Fu laughed and said in his smoky voice, "Maybe it's time to clean up public security's rotten apples."

Within the short span of a year, Xie Lanshan could transform from an antidrug hero to a rotten apple.

"Haven't you got anything to say for yourself? How could old Xie have a failure and disgrace for a son like you, you little bastard!" The old man's explosive temper erupted like an unstoppable volcano, growing harsher and more brutal the longer he scolded.

Tao Longyue couldn't stand hearing those words and called out to stop him, "Dad—"

"There's no 'dad' in the bureau, only your superiors!" Tao Jun interrupted his son with a malicious tone, then turned to Xie Lanshan with a pained heart. "Do you remember how hard it was for you to earn this uniform? All the rough times you had to go through and how much blood you had to shed? I know your father watching from the heavens must also want you to succeed him and be a respectable policeman!"

Xie Lanshan hadn't spoken a word throughout the ordeal. Every time someone else mentioned his father, his throat went dry. In past tongue-lashings, Xie Lanshan would always hold up his nicely defined chin as if he didn't care. Yet now, he removed all pretentions and became the little boy Tao Jun had first seen many years ago.

Back then, Tao Jun had knelt before Xie Lanshan and placed Xie Jiaqing's bullet around the boy's neck. The boy had just lost his father and was caught in the throes of sorrow, yet his expression never wavered and he never shed a single tear.

Boys don't cry—that was what old Xie had told him.

Tao Jun's heart finally softened. He sighed. "Leave your weapon and gear here before you see the therapist."

Xie Lanshan dropped his handcuffs on the table.

"Your badge too."

Taken by surprise, Xie Lanshan's hand froze in midair.

"Sir, I'm also responsible for letting this happen, so you should punish me." Tao Longyue decided to stand with his friend and was already reaching for his own badge.

Xie Lanshan stopped Tao Longyue, then he carefully placed his badge and police ID before Tao Jun.

"This is your old boss's decision too. You should know better than anyone else why he's punishing you," Tao Jun said in the end. "Don't tarnish your father's good name."

At this point, Shen Liufei had finished all his paperwork and was about to leave the bureau. He walked toward the front door, stopped, and then shot a glance at Xie Lanshan.

Noticing someone was watching him, Xie Lanshan turned his head.

Their eyes met—tangled, collided, fused, separated.

At almost exactly the same time, Xie Lanshan withdrew his gaze and Shen Liufei turned and left the building.

(vii)

After he stepped out of the Hanhai City Municipal Bureau, Shen Liufei got into a black Bentley.

In the car, Shen Liufei asked Fu Yunxian, "What if I really was the culprit?"

Cigarette dangling from his mouth, Fu Yunxian responded to the question with another, seeming completely unbothered. "Is that important?" Even if he was the culprit, Fu Yunxian could still dismiss him as innocent in court.

Shen Liufei chuckled back in acknowledgment of the man's professional abilities. "No, it's not."

The sky was darkening as it reached rush hour after work. Cars filled the streets, slowing down into a mundane pattern; layers upon layers of gray smoke escaped the gas vents, filling the air.

After passing by a cross street, Shen Liufei suddenly spoke up, “Mr. Fu, can I ask you to take me somewhere?”

Fu Yunxian pondered, then asked beneath his breath, “That Jing Jiang Grand Garden where the mass murder occurred?”

Shen Liufei nodded. “I just want to have a look.”

Fu Yunxian ordered the driver, “Turn left on the next street. Head toward the Jing Jiang Grand Garden.”

Fu Yunxian had known Shen Liufei for a long time; he loved beauty but was not interested in men, so the two maintained a good distance from each other as friends.

It started off with an email or a phone call. Shen Liufei had knocked on the door and paid the hefty advisory fees to listen to the legendary stories of the “number one criminal defense lawyer.” Of course, he simply wanted to hear about the gruesome murders.

To Fu Yunxian, the young man was a handsome young scion of a rich family: elegantly dressed and well educated with a refined taste and an artistic mind. He was virtually perfect in the eyes of the elite class, but the young man showed no interest in a luxurious lifestyle and instead was quite attached to crime stories—this certainly wasn’t normal.

They soon arrived at Jing Jiang Grand Garden.

When Shen Liufei stepped out of the car, Fu Yunxian turned to him. “There’s something inside you. It will leak out and corrupt you; you won’t be able to block it off, so instead of trying to suppress it, maybe let it go and allow it to run its course.”

“I know.” With a courteous nod toward Fu Yunxian, Shen Liufei walked away.

The sky was completely black, and none of them knew how long Shen Liufei was going to stay. The driver turned to ask Fu Yunxian if they were going to wait for the man to return.

“No, let’s go.” He had just finished a cigarette but immediately lit another. The lawyer blew out a small cloud of smoke. “My wife’s still waiting for me to make dinner back home.”

During this late hour, the homicide and violent crime unit was still on overtime. Only Xie Lanshan had left early and was now huddled up on his couch at home to watch a crime movie about an undercover cop. The movie had aired last year and was quite popular, making a few billion yuan in total box office sales. Supposedly, it was based on a true story, and the film’s depictions were certainly accurate.

Xie Lanshan's colleagues had all watched the movie and praised it; they'd wanted to call him over for their second viewing, but the man had refused.

Finally seeing it now, he certainly couldn't relate to the story.

The drug lord captured and tortured the undercover cop in the movie until, in his last breath, the cop's body was covered in lashes from a leather whip. Xie Lanshan couldn't help but laugh and feel fortunate he hadn't suffered this awful treatment.

When he'd first returned to the public security forces, his boss had arranged a thorough physical checkup, which had yielded a clean result. No signs of substance abuse, no trace of disease. For someone living under storms of fire and bullets, he didn't even have any fresh scars. The doctor was shocked and claimed Xie Lanshan had to be blessed by luck and the heavens.

Xie Lanshan hadn't responded. If he had to explain the situation, he would have said he'd been blessed by Mu Kun.

During his time undercover, he'd followed Mu Kun to Laos, where they met with a drug lord to open up a new market. Among them was a large man of about two hundred kilograms, who was also considered a minor boss. The man wore a shiny golden necklace that made him all the more conspicuous as they snuck out of the country.

On their trip, they passed a well-known village plagued by AIDS, where a crowd of emaciated children had quickly gathered to beg them for food, and the portly man generously took out a handful of colorful candy from his pocket, ready to pass it out.

Before he could, Xie Lanshan had grabbed his wrist and said coldly, "They're still children."

These colorful candies were actually a new drug disguised as sweets.

"Why do you care? They aren't even our people." The larger man attempted to pull his arm out of Xie Lanshan's grip. "Besides, these kids are probably all sick anyway. They won't live long."

Refusing to yield, Xie Lanshan gripped the man's wrist with enough force to dislocate it. He repeated himself more sternly: "They're still children."

"All right, all right, Saint Xie, you're the boss here." The large man didn't have enough strength to fight against Xie Lanshan. Seeing he could not win, he had no choice but to back down.

After completing the business meeting with the new drug lord, the large man returned to their residence and took his revenge. He explained the incident to Mu Kun and stated with no uncertainty that he was suspicious of Xie Lanshan's identity.

Sitting lazily on the sofa, Mu Kun played with the knife in his hand without a word, shooting a look straight at Xie Lanshan, who explained without any sign of panic, "We still have to be here for a few more days to take care of a

big business endeavor. There's no need to call attention to ourselves."

"No way. If you aren't a buddha reincarnated, you must be a goddamn pig, so which one are you, huh?" Drug dealers called antidrug police pigs. Laughing, the larger man stood before Xie Lanshan. "If you're not a pig, then have a taste. You can't possibly be a drug dealer without ever touching some goods, right?"

Since he enlisted in the special forces, Xie Lanshan had long prepared for others to force him to do drugs. He immediately pulled out a bag of edibles from his pocket, ripped open the bag, and was ready to dump the new product into his mouth.

"Wait." The fat man had a better idea. His meaty face twisted into a malicious grin. "Those are for kids. We're all adult men here. If you want to taste some, we should get the good stuff."

As he finished, he pulled down a baggie of white powder, a 99 percent high-density number 5.

Sitting down, Xie Lanshan pretended to speak like an experienced user. "Then give me some paper."

Off to the side, Mu Kun still eyed him gravely.

After skillfully laying a small bit of number-5 powder on the tinfoil, Xie Lanshan turned on the lighter and heated the powder. White smoke flowed into the air. Xie Lanshan wrapped a paper pipe and was ready to take it in.

Swoosh! A knife landed right beside the tinfoil, stopping Xie Lanshan.

Mu Kun walked over. He didn't look at Xie Lanshan, instead glaring at the larger man.

He pulled up a piece of wood, then violently lashed at the large man, striking him again and again over a dozen times until his teeth almost cracked in his mouth and fresh blood and saliva rolled down from his chin.

Even Xie Lanshan couldn't stand the sight. "That's enough."

"Don't worry. He's got a good temper." The small wooden board was close to snapping in half, so Mu Kun shoved the broken half into the larger man's mouth and smiled. "Don't you?"

The large man could only nod.

Finally satisfied, Mu Kun tossed aside the wooden board and pointed at the number 5 on the table. "Don't ever touch this stuff."

Learning Xie Lanshan's fleeting moments of benevolence toward drug sellers and the average man were the same, the drug lord felt a sudden spike of joy. He wrapped his arm around Xie Lanshan's shoulders. "Looks like he was right. If you aren't a pig, you're a living buddha." He sent everyone else out of the room. "There's something more exciting than drugs. Do you want to try?"

As he spoke, Mu Kun almost pushed the man down onto the sofa. He pinched Xie Lanshan's cheeks, staring at him with a hot and passionate gaze.

But Xie Lanshan pretended he didn't understand.

"How boring." Bitterly, Mu Kun finally let go of Xie Lanshan and poured himself a glass of wine. "There's a heroic air to you, certainly not unlike a cop."

"I *am* a cop's son," Xie Lanshan responded airily.

"Then why don't you become one?"

"I screwed up." Xie Lanshan was a man of few words. This let Mu Kun do the talking.

"Been in jail and shoved someone's head into the toilet before?"

"Sure." Xie Lanshan hadn't expected Mu Kun to look that deep into his history.

"Even if a cop's son doesn't become a cop, he has no reason to become a drug dealer, right?"

"We're all here to make a living; it doesn't matter what I do."

Xie Lanshan had his own explanation. His father was a hero who died in the line of duty, but his mother never got a moment of rest; she drove herself mad in a psych ward. He wanted to follow in his father's footsteps but ended up causing serious trouble and was expelled from public security. While in jail, he also suffered insults and harassment that had hardened his heart. He eventually walked astray from his ideal life and became a bandit almost overnight. The story wasn't new or unique, but it was believable.

Xie Lanshan had also taken part in the last operation to ambush Mu Kun. Only he'd known Mu Kun's plan B; only he knew that man's last-resort escape plan.

Mu Kun had been forced to the edge of the cliff. Cops were coming, and he had no route to escape, but he'd remained calm and smiled. "Let me go, or you'll never know how your father died. I've already discovered who the Apostle is; do you not want to know who killed your father?"

Xie Lanshan hesitated, and in those three seconds, a sniper killed another drug dealer standing beside him. Before he could react, the red dot had appeared right on Xie Lanshan's own forehead.

"We used to be so good... we could've been better together..." Mu Kun looked almost pitiful before Xie Lanshan, who had already lowered his gun.

With everyone else beside him fallen, Xie Lanshan responded coldly, "I'm a soldier. You're a bandit."

The helicopter closed in. Mu Kun leapt forward and caught the ladder rope dropping down from the helicopter. Unexpectedly, he turned and killed the sniper above. "Stay alive, Xie Lanshan, until the day I come back for you." Once he climbed up to the door of the helicopter, the man even turned to blow a kiss at the cop.

Shortly after, the backup units arrived. Without further hesitation, Xie Lanshan pulled up a shoulder rocket launcher and eliminated Mu Kun's helicopter.

Following a massive boom, the remnants of the helicopter fell into the Mekong River, yet they never managed to retrieve Mu Kun's corpse, and to this day were unsure whether he had perished in the explosion or escaped.

When Xie Lanshan first returned, rumor had it he let Mu Kun flee, but this was quickly shut down by his direct boss with an iron fist.

The two-hour-long movie finally reached its happy ending, where the good guy was honored and praised while the bad guys were captured. A clean black-and-white separation that couldn't be any more clichéd.

Once the screen turned black, Xie Lanshan found himself sinking back into darkness. None of the lights inside his house were on; only the dim fluorescent glow from the TV screen broke the darkness.

He recalled Old Tao's words from earlier in the day: *You should know better than anyone else why he's punishing you.*

Perhaps the seeds of suspicion had already been planted back then.

Unlike others who might be emotionally moved by the film, Xie Lanshan only stood up, slightly dissociated, and dug up the business card Tao Jun had given him from the drawer. He lowered his head and stared at it for a long while.

Mental therapy hospital, he thought. *Sure, I guess I'll go.*

Three Suspects

Thanks to the witness account Shen Liufei provided, Captain Tao quickly pulled out an end from the ball of knots tangling the case. Sexual harassment in professional settings was a direction for further investigation. Because few escape room companies operated within Hanhai City, narrowing down the one company recently looking to expand a new project was simple. Information about that suspicious man in the photograph soon surfaced: Cong Ying's boyfriend, Li Rui.

His file was spotless: no criminal records, graduated from top schools—rather impressive from society's perspective. The man was thirty-three, a young entrepreneur, and an honorary volunteer of civil services. An ace student since his youth, he even made a name for himself on the internet by founding his escape room design company, Qiong Li.

Tao Longyue looked at Li Rui's file in confusion. Why would Cong Ying's father, Cong Zhiming, vehemently reject a fine young man like him as his future son-in-law?

After discovering some new clues, Captain Tao took Ding Li to Cong Ying's last employer. Cong Ying's sudden resignation might have had something to do with the sexual harassment case.

Ding Li, cheerful young woman that she was, made a favorable impression the last time she visited to retrieve documents. She quickly discovered from Cong Ying's former colleagues that the CEO was one Feifan, last name Niu. Boss Niu's words were as good as law in the office, but a submissive husband to his wife, Jin Qian. The young women in the company both revered and feared the woman. An overly suspicious person, Mrs. Niu had an infamously short temper. She often micromanaged her husband's life and hovered around him religiously in fear of young foxes that might try to steal her husband.

The managerial side of the company was mostly occupied by married men; the only female manager was the head of the HR department where Cong Ying worked—her former supervisor, Lang Li, around thirty years of age. She seemed classy and looked approachable.

As Ding Li asked about the sexual harassment incident, a woman in heavy makeup walked by and called out with her sharp and loud voice, "What's going on here? Do you think we're paying you all to chitchat?"

This woman was Jin Qian. She was around the same age as Lang Li; upon closer inspection, despite having quite refined features, heavy makeup couldn't quite cover up old age. The company next door was remodeling, so the sounds of drills and construction echoed from the other side. Jin Qian clearly had no intention of cooperating with the police on their investigation and found the excuse to stir up a scene. She turned and called out to Captain Tao, "Do you police deal with outside disturbances? It's so loud. How can we work with this noise?!"

After her rant, she left.

Ding Li took a careful look at Jin Qian's foot, then turned to shake her head at Tao Longyue. The boss's wife did not fit the criteria of their suspect by height, body type, or shoe size.

"I'm sorry. Our boss is pretty short-tempered, as you can see." Once the woman was a fair distance away, Lang Li quickly apologized to Ding Li and Captain Tao on behalf of Jin Qian and sighed. "Little Cong had a good relationship with us before she left, but we haven't been in touch since she resigned. I remember she mentioned once she hadn't just been harassed at work. It seemed the harasser's wife or someone else also was stalking and threatening her."

"If civilians were all as cooperative as you in investigations, we would have no trouble catching the criminals." While both were women, Jin Qian was like a hot chili pepper that could fire up the air, and Lang Li was a clear fountain who easily won Ding Li's fondness.

"If all public security workers were as pretty as you, nobody would even think about breaking the law—they would spend all their time looking at you instead." Already in their second meeting, Lang Li seemed to also have taken a liking to Ding Li. She offered to leave her WeChat information, saying she would be more than happy to help with the investigation in any way. She didn't hesitate to share her condolences either. "Little Cong was a pretty girl. She attracted quite a number of busy bees. It's such a shame that she left us at such a young age."

After stepping out of Cong Ying's former workplace, Tao Longyue decided to pay a visit to Li Rui's escape room company. He suddenly remembered poor Xie Lanshan, who had been forced into seclusion, and gave the man a call. Of course, the same rules always applied. They never did small talk, always leaping straight into friendly jabs and banter. "It's getting hot out. Be careful. Don't want you to turn into a barbecued traffic cop under the sun, so make sure to slather on that sunscreen."

"My skin's immaculate. I don't even tan."

"Then work on your biceps more; if a car gets busted on the highway, you'll have to push it off the road with the driver."

“If you’ve got nothing else to say, I’m hanging up.” Xie Lanshan didn’t want to continue bickering. “If you’ve really got spare time on your hands, you might as well solve that case of yours. Pretty Miss Doctor Su’s a bombshell. You can’t let others take her hand before you do.”

“Wait, don’t hang up.” Tao Longyue finally asked if Xie Lanshan wanted to go investigate Li Rui with them.

“I’m good.” Without his badge, walking in would be trespassing on private property. Xie Lanshan was law-abiding on these types of matters and refused outright over the phone, saying that he was going to therapy.

“No way—you’re finally convinced?”

“The whole world’s drunk while I’m the lone sober man.” Xie Lanshan was on his way to the hospital by public transit, and answering lackadaisically. “So I guess I’ll just drink with the rest of you all.”

Of course, he hadn’t yet yielded to authority. On one hand, with his police badge now in custody, he would be officially kicked out if he tried to cause any more trouble. On the other, his insomnia and headaches had been getting worse. Perceiving a large volume of fresh blood would increase his pain so much that even seeing a red carpet could trigger his vertigo.

He was a cop with hemophobia—he might as well be a chef who couldn’t stand salt. If exposed, he would become the world’s laughingstock.

Tao Longyue heard the beep of a bus card being swiped from the other end of the line. “You’re not driving?”

“I haven’t really felt like driving lately.” Xie Lanshan wedged his phone between his ear and shoulder. Noticing a pregnant woman making her way through the crowded passengers toward him, he got up to give her his seat without a second thought.

To his surprise, this young woman covered in a thin layer of sweat simply had a large belly. The girl slowly removed her hand from her stomach, growing flustered. “I... I’m not pregnant...”

Eyes from all around turned toward the girl briefly like sharp knives. Some people even levied a harsh judgment upon her: *She’s too fat*.

“I gave you my seat because you’re beautiful.” Without skipping a beat, Xie Lanshan’s quick reaction turned the awkward situation around. He gave a delightful grin to the average-looking girl and, with a sincere and earnest look in his eye, praised her from the heart, “You’re really pretty.”

The young woman had never been so earnestly complimented on her looks, especially by a handsome young man, and grew even more embarrassed. Under the curious gazes of the other passengers, she finally sat down proudly with her back upright.

Tao Longyue heard it all from the other side of the line. “Stop giving me sass. We’re talking business.”

“Then get back to it.” Xie Lanshan turned toward that round woman, staring at him dumbly and gave her another warm smile, then reminded Tao Longyue, “Don’t forget to find that woman who lit the surveillance room on fire.”

“I left Ding Li to collect data on the woman’s footprint left behind at the crime scene already. Shen Liufei said Cong Ying told him about being sexually harassed at her workplace before, so we have reasonable suspicion the person who left the footprint was the one who set the surveillance on fire. She may also be the wife of a male manager of that company. Normally, finding a culprit would have been as impossible as finding a needle from a haystack, but since Cong Ying only worked for two companies, we narrowed down the list considerably and saved a lot of time. But I still don’t understand. Why did the culprit want to replicate Shen Liufei’s painting?”

Xie Lanshan said, “Why don’t you ask then?”

Tao Longyue returned the question. “Ask who? Shen Liufei?”

Xie Lanshan wanted Tao Longyue to ask Li Rui, but after giving it some thought, he realized asking Shen Liufei wasn’t the worst idea.

Tao Longyue thought his friend still suspected the artist. “Shen Liufei has been cleared from the suspects list. We’ve already checked; he really was watching two horror films back-to-back in the theater on the night of the murder. One started at 12 A.M., and another at 2 A.M. He never walked out of the theater for more than five minutes during intermission, and you were there with him for the second film. The forensic division said Cong Ying’s family died between 11:30 P.M. to 12:30 A.M. that night, and that sports guy said he witnessed Cong Ying having an argument with her boyfriend, Li Rui, outside at 11:45 P.M. It takes at least forty-five minutes to drive one way from Jing Jiang Grand Garden to the movie theater by your house. There’s no way that the man could be the culprit.”

With a sound of acknowledgment, Xie Lanshan fell into deep thought.

“Although—” Tao Longyue pondered. “I still think something’s off about that Shen guy, but I can’t put my finger on it. The look in his eye is way too cold.”

It certainly was. But he wasn’t purposefully distancing himself from the world—it was more like a sense of dissociation etched into his soul. The man was taking care to hide something behind his refined appearance and mannerisms.

A curtain of mist hung over the man, but no matter how beautiful the flower was, it was still hidden behind intangible layers.

When his stop arrived, Xie Lanshan hung up the phone and got off the bus.

The hospital was only about five hundred meters away; he could see it from where he was standing. A large and exquisite white mansion.

Xie Lanshan had already called to confirm his appointment. According to the front desk staff, his primary therapist would be female. He briefly stopped by a flower shop and thought about purchasing a small bouquet.

The young woman working at the shop enthusiastically greeted Xie Lanshan and let him choose some roses, assuming he was giving the flowers to his girlfriend. She advertised warmly that everyone loved roses, which made them the most fitting for lovers to give to each other.

"Might not be true," Xie Lanshan suddenly said. "There just happen to be some weirdos out there who don't like roses."

"Your girlfriend?" The young woman quickly pulled out a delicate bouquet. "Then how about these? I'm sure she would like lilies."

"Not a girlfriend." Instinctively, Xie Lanshan thought about Shen Liufei but couldn't seem to find a proper descriptor. "Just a weirdo."

After paying, Xie Lanshan walked out of the shop with the lilies. He let out a small breath, steeled himself one last time, and walked into the hospital.

Xie Lanshan had imagined the therapist would most certainly talk about things like PTSD, nightmares, insomnia, personality changes—all the things people around him had made note of, even though he never really felt he'd succumbed to those. Regardless, he filled all the common symptoms of textbook PTSD.

Even though he suffered from chronic headaches, he refused to believe they were an indication of unstable mental health. When his father died, his mother had gone mad, but he had never suffered trauma and didn't believe Mu Kun could change that. So, to avoid spending too much time on useless discussions, Xie Lanshan resolved to utilize his charm, get a quick diagnosis, and satisfy his bosses.

Carrying the flowers, Xie Lanshan stopped by the therapist's door and raised a hand to knock.

"Come in," a pleasant female voice rang out from inside.

Xie Lanshan opened the door, stunned the moment he met the woman's eyes.

The therapist was also shocked; her exceptionally bright and fine face suddenly flashed through several complicated emotions. After a long while, she finally managed a professional smile.

She said, "It's been a while, a-Lan."

(ii)

The therapist working closely with the municipal bureau was Song Qilian, Xie Lanshan's reputed only female relationship, which "never even went past hand-holding."

When first assigned to the job, Xie Lanshan was nowhere close to coming in contact with a drug lord like Mu Kun. He could only hang out with the locals selling ecstasy at bars. To adhere to the rules of these people, he'd needed to show them his rotten side—at least enough to convince them he ran with their crowd so he could get his foot in the door and complete his mission.

Unfortunately, one night, Xie Lanshan had walked out of the bar with two other drug sellers, each with a woman picked up from the bar hanging off their arms, and Song Qilian had witnessed the scene.

By the time he returned home in the middle of the night, Song Qilian was already waiting inside; she had the keys to his house. Xie Lanshan had always been bad with words. Before he could even verbally express his affection, he handed over his house keys as a gesture of letting her be a part of his life. During the six months he'd spent in jail earlier in their relationship, Song Qilian would often come dust and clean for him.

"When you were imprisoned for beating someone up, I still thought you simply made an honest mistake in the spur of the moment. I waited for you..." Tears rolling down her face, Song Qilian pried a bag of colorful pills from Xie Lanshan's coat pocket. She shook the bag before him, pained and despaired by how far he had fallen. "What is this? It's ecstasy, isn't it? How did you turn out so badly? If you needed to talk, you could've told me..."

Before being sent off as an undercover agent, his boss warned Xie Lanshan not to reveal his undercover identity to anyone, not even Tao Jun. He was told an extremely rough and long road waited ahead. Once he made his decision, he would not have the choice to return.

So, even before Song Qilian's tearful questioning, he refused to utter a word. He had always been a reliable man.

"You have your reasons, right? This is a police mission?" Song Qilian was a smart woman; if he let out even a breath, she would instantly understand.

"Stop fucking nagging. Who are you to me anyway?" He grabbed the bag and sat down on his own sofa, carefully counting each pill like a precious jewel. "We haven't even slept together. How dare you scold me."

He bit down on a toothpick, taking on the attitude and manner of a thug.

"How did you become like this? I can't believe... I still can't believe..."

"Dear lord, if you ain't gonna sleep with me, then leave!" Xie Lanshan spat out the toothpick, stood, and walked over to pull down Song Qilian's clothes. He pushed her aggressively like he was about to violate her, only to receive a hard slap.

"You disgust me."

That was the last thing Song Qilian had said to him.

Now in the doctor's office, the two were left stunned by this completely unexpected reunion for at least ten seconds.

They'd known each other since they were in their early teens, so they skipped the pointless introductions. Xie Lanshan dropped the flowers. His gaze fell to Song Qilian's desk where there was a photo of Song Qilian and a young boy. "This is your son?"

"Yeah. Everyone says they can tell he's my kid."

Xie Lanshan picked up the photo and carefully studied it, then smiled. Even at five or six years old, the boy's facial features very much resembled his mother's.

Before this sudden encounter, he'd planned to fight with the therapist, but now that desire vanished. Xie Lanshan walked toward the patient's seat and sat down, closed his eyes, and said to Song Qilian, "You can start now."

Song Qilian began to murmur something softly and slowly to Xie Lanshan, like one of those hypnotic treatments straight from a movie. His eyelids grew heavy and his whole body relaxed.

"You see a door now, and you carefully open it to follow the only guiding light inside. What do you see?"

He once again saw that woman in his dreams. The water inside the tub spilled, flowing through the cracks of the concrete flooring of the bathroom.

Wearing vinyl gloves, Xie Lanshan choked the woman, pushing her down to the ground. She struggled desperately, attempting to push him away. Her nails left deep scars from his neck down to his chest.

During their struggle, the woman's hair spread onto the ground, and her tear-filled face was finally exposed—

Xie Lanshan suddenly woke up from the deep hypnosis.

He sat straight up, panting heavily as cold sweat dripped from his head.

"What did you see?" Song Qilian asked, concerned.

This was the first time he'd seen the woman's face in his dreams. It wasn't just anyone—the woman was undeniably Cong Ying.

Hastily, Xie Lanshan pulled himself up, saying he still had business to take care of, and ran toward the door.

His footsteps stopped briefly, and he turned to look at Song Qilian.

"If I knew it was you, I would've gotten you white ones instead." He motioned with his chin toward the bouquet on the desk. "I remember those are your favorite."

His smile was gentle and soft like a feather lightly tickling the tip of one's heart. It almost felt as though they were turning back time. Song Qilian saw Xie Lanshan of a decade ago, as an awkward and shy young man who spoke little and smiled even less. Crowds of young women would often flock around him to chat him up, but he would become flustered and lost.

When Xie Lanshan completed his undercover mission, Song Qilian discovered the truth. However, she only found out from her collaborative work

with the city bureau, and even then it had come secondhand from other police officers.

Stepping out of the hospital, Xie Lanshan was ready to call a cab when a heavy black motorcycle zoomed past him at an alarming speed, stunning the rest of the vehicles on the road. Despite its speed, the motorbike seemed to be quite adept at maneuvering and responsive; the driver lightly pressed on the brake and stopped within an inch of Xie Lanshan.

Xie Lanshan took a quick glance at the vehicle. It was a slick and modern design, covered in a cool metal black. The tip of the bike sported a bit of red, like a powerful black horse carrying a ball of fire on its forehead.

The driver was also dressed in matching black biker gear that was equally stylish and sleek. He lifted the tinted visor on his helmet, exposing a pair of sharp but deep eyes, and tossed another helmet toward Xie Lanshan. “Get on.”

A past relationship was meant to remain solely in memories, and Xie Lanshan was still dwelling in a strange emotion from his earlier reminiscing. Now his spirits lifted as he saw Shen Liufei. “You really are a weirdo.”

He was weird, all right. It was almost as if the classy and refined artist had magically transformed into a wild biker.

Xie Lanshan looked displeased, even at the prospect of being given a lift, and raised an eyebrow. “You’re making a grown adult man like me sit in the back seat? What poor treatment.”

“Aren’t you in a hurry?” Shen Liufei didn’t like to see Xie Lanshan wasting time, so he looked away. “Li Rui’s office will be off work in half an hour.”

“You know where I’m going?” Xie Lanshan slowly put on the helmet. “What, are you starting on the job early to greet the culprit with me?”

“No.”

“Then why?” Xie Lanshan mounted the bike.

“I just don’t like to be given homage to in this way.” Shen Liufei grabbed Xie Lanshan’s arms to wrap them around his own waist. “Sit tight.”

(iii)

Shen Liufei’s driving proved to be tempestuous and aggressive as he sped through the car-filled roads like a lightning-fast bullet. The black bike transformed into a shadow whizzing past the windows; even the red mark on the tip of the bike became a red shooting star through the traffic. Pedestrians could barely make out the two men on the bike from the blurry silhouette flying past their view.

Xie Lanshan thought, *This shit acted like an aloof, high and mighty artist two days ago. Who would’ve expected him to be such a wild man deep down?* He was almost relieved he wasn’t a traffic officer yet. Then again, he would

have loved to release all his pent-up bitterness at once by giving the biker a ticket and suspending his license.

The wind rushed by their ears while the heavy bike shot through the road like a jet. Xie Lanshan dared not loosen his grip as he wrapped his arms tightly around Shen Liufei's waist. It was quite a nice waist, thin but built without any excess fat.

The forty-minute trip was virtually cut in half as their destination—a creative business center called 1977—came into sight ahead. Colorful and unique architectural designs filled the area; instead of the dull concrete of traditional office buildings looming overhead, they found themselves in an amusement park built from vibrant bricks. The creative zone wasn't large, but the small community was well equipped for business and the elegant scenery was made complete by the tiny bridges and garden at its center.

Qiong Li Design's headquarters was located inside the community. A manager of the company was present that day to check on the office, so the gate to the building was closed and a few security guards made sure no solicitors entered.

"What a pain." Xie Lanshan would have to put in a lot of effort to convince one of the guards to let them in. "If only they were middle-aged women, I'd just use my charm on them."

The bike was nearing the gate, but Shen Liufei showed no sign of slowing down and instead accelerated. The security guards put their hands up, ready to stop them, but they had no choice but to flee out of the way.

Xie Lanshan was shocked. "What are you doing?"

"Hold on tight." As the last syllable dropped, Shen Liufei reared the front of his bike, lifting the entire vehicle. Like a powerful horse, the bike soared through the gates, more than a meter high in the air.

The moment the heavy motorbike flew into the sky, the five-o'clock sun shimmered brightly one last time before setting. For an instant, both the bike's engine and the winds disappeared as if the whole world had stopped, leaving only him and the other man.

They landed safely. Shen Liufei cut the engine just in time, parked, and took his helmet off. Some of the businesses in the office building were already done for the day, and the white-collared women from the arts building gathered to check out the bike and the strange man. Xie Lanshan knew his own charm but also was aware those gazes were not for him. The driver was a handsome lad, and the bike was stylish.

Xie Lanshan dismounted and handed his helmet over to Shen Liufei. He had been caught up in the roller coaster ride of a trip earlier, his heart racing without rest. There hadn't been time to strike up a conversation. Now that he had finally caught his breath, he took the opportunity to ask, "What does your

painting and *The Brink of Light and Dark* actually mean?"

Shen Liufei responded without hesitation, "At the brink of light and dark—as in before the black and white pieces cross paths in a game. It means every move after will change the fate of the entire battle."

Xie Lanshan recalled, "That's the definition on Baidu."

Shen Liufei nodded lightly. "And that's exactly what it means."

Xie Lanshan planned on going upstairs, but Shen Liufei had no intention of following him. "Then why don't you wait here until I'm done and then take me back?"

"You think I'm giving you a ride home too? Don't get ahead of yourself."

"Would it be a problem?"

"It's not that I can't." Shen Liufei sighed. Despite his joking tone, his face remained expressionless. "How about you call me your cousin again?"

"You've already played me once in the movie theater. Is that your new hobby or something?" Turning his head, Xie Lanshan walked off. "I can take a knife even if it makes me bleed, but you ain't getting another 'hey, cuz' from me."

Unfazed, Shen Liufei paused before speaking up after Xie Lanshan took a few steps forward. "If a civilian has objections to the way a policeman enforces the law, they can file an official complaint to the respective people's court located within the jurisdiction of the public security branch."

These were the words of Tao Jun. If one more person filed a complaint about Xie Lanshan abusing his power and law enforcement privileges, he would really become the cancer of their branch.

Xie Lanshan turned around. He clasped his hands together in front of his face and arched his back down in a bowing motion. "Please, my dear brother, spare your baby bro's ass this once." As he finished, he lightly bit down on his lower lip. The dimples by his cheeks showed faintly as he gave Shen Liufei an innocent and pure smile.

While it was admittedly charming, Shen Liufei remained unmoved and simply gave him a cool look. "Didn't you say 'ain't getting another one' earlier?"

"Y'know, men. We're fickle, shameless creatures—no better than hole-digging dogs." Xie Lanshan also narrowed his eyes to study Shen Liufei's expression, then changed the topic to compliment the man, "Of course, I'm not saying you're a dog. You're an angel that descended from the heavens, a miracle, a blessing from a living buddha."

The words, in their absolute shamelessness and ridiculousness, managed to finally bring out a hint of laughter on Shen Liufei's face. As the other man's cold appearance suddenly grew more animated, Xie Lanshan sensed something flicker before his eyes, and a strange thought appeared in his head.

He'd seen this man somewhere before.

After successfully sending the man to his destination, Shen Liufei put his helmet on and raced back to his own house.

Shen Liufei had just returned from the States and was renting the entire twenty-second floor of a residential building—in other words, a palatial one-story condo with a balcony. When night fell, one could view the entire city and the vibrant lights of the mortal world below looked more ethereal than in a dream.

As the door closed behind him, Shen Liufei took off the biking jacket along with the tank top underneath, revealing his firm and well-built body.

A large and coy tattoo started from the left side of his neck, wrapping down to his shoulders, chest, and arms. The image seemed to be an abstract phoenix design but, at first glance, looked more like a peach tree blooming over his body.

Upon closer inspection, his skin was littered with scars. The wounds were uneven and plentiful, some even hideous, but they were all skillfully hidden by the tattoos, making them almost artful.

Shen Liufei changed into a white-collared shirt but didn't button it up. He lay on the sofa and closed his eyes; moments later, he got up to play some music and fend off the silence.

A vintage record player sat on the display shelf in the living room, and a freshly opened package on the tea table was filled with vinyl records. Shen Liufei flipped through the box and picked one, a disc of Debussy's early works. He studied the disc for a while, furrowing his brow without seeming very interested. He placed the record back in the box, took out his phone, and found some heavy metal music online.

He turned the volume up to its maximum. Under this intense, forceful, and mad noise, he walked toward the window of the balcony.

By the window was a wooden easel holding an unfinished, realistic oil painting of a man's face. His features were sharp and defined with eyes set deeper than most Asian men, and his face was accented by sweet, pinkish lips.

Shen Liufei picked up a brush and continued the painting. He was focused —consumed by his work—until the ring of his phone interrupted him.

The call came from the other side of the Pacific Ocean, and the voice of a man rang out from the other end: "I've mailed your old vinyl records."

"I got them." Shen Liufei set the brush down and reclined back onto the sofa. He responded courteously, "Thanks."

"Is everything all right over there?"

"It's fine." After a few seconds of silence, Shen Liufei said, "I found him."

(iv)

Even before Xie Lanshan appeared, Tao Longyue already had his hands full. He hadn't expected to arrive at such an inconvenient time. The community leaders, wanting to support growing business owners, had sent in a team of managers for training and office tours.

In Captain Tao's typical style of investigation, he would have barged in through the front doors to stun the unsuspecting office workers and then summoned the suspect back to the bureau. Yet this time he was met with a supervising manager, the community owner on one side, and another secretary on the other. This successfully stymied Tao Longyue's energy. It wasn't a good time for an interrogation and it would be even more impossible to take the suspect back to the bureau.

Recalling his earlier misconduct with Shen Liufei, he couldn't bring himself to make the same mistake again.

Instead, Li Rui himself took the initiative to greet the officer. His eyes were swollen and red, his chin slightly blue beneath his stubble; he had forced himself back to work instead of letting the pain of loss defeat him.

From an outside perspective, Li Rui was a young and humble individual and hardly resembled a murderer, but Tao Longyue was a cop of many years. Suspects who didn't "look" like the bad guy would often turn out to be the real culprit in the end. Feeling suspicious, he glanced through the window into the man's office. Among the few books on Li Rui's desk was Shen Liufei's *The Brink of Light and Dark*.

"We hadn't been in contact for a few days after we broke up, and I only heard about Ying yesterday. Unfortunately, I have more urgent business on hand right now. A new escape room project is about to launch, and we've been preparing a charity event for the past year—look, the leaders and sponsors are all here." Though clearly grieving, the man remained strong. He persevered at work, showing dignity and his patriotic heart to serve his community.

As Li Rui spoke, a middle-aged man, one of the managers not too far away, waved toward him. "Hey, Li, now that the secretary's here, you should take him around the building. Let's meet for dinner tonight and you can share your story about how you started your business. We'll write something for you for marketing."

Of course, Tao Longyue didn't want to make this trip a wasted effort but didn't have any more immediate evidence at hand. That witness account from the sports fan was too weak to warrant any action.

"I promise I'll visit the bureau in a few days and help with the investigation on the case." Li Rui's expression was almost pleading. "I won't run, I swear."

The middle-aged manager was shooting glances at him to hurry up; Tao Longyue let out a sigh and agreed to let the man go.

After thanking him, Li Rui called his secretary over, “Tracy, take Captain Tao to the door.”

At this time, Xie Lanshan was attempting to pass off his identification to the front desk of Qiong Li Designs, claiming he came with the officer. His badge was gone, but he’d kept the ripped cover. Xie Lanshan waved it by the young woman’s face at the front desk. Without showing any signs of guilt, he placed it back in his pocket before the young woman could get a closer look.

The receptionist didn’t even bother to stop him; there were too many “I’m with him” leaders and office workers today, so she hadn’t dared to stop anyone.

Xie Lanshan walked past the break room as two young women walked out—a thinner one and a chubby one—both complaining they would have overtime again tonight. Of course, overtime was unavoidable with design firms.

In order to welcome the guests, the floor had been freshly mopped and cleaned. The thinner woman was getting a cup of instant coffee. Just as she blew off the steam from the freshly boiled water to take a sip, the other young woman beside her gasped and slipped on the smooth floor.

A hand around her waist stopped her fall. Xie Lanshan circled around the two young women as if he was dancing. After saving one from falling, he swiftly stole the coffee cup from the other with his free hand.

The young woman was stunned by the disappearance of the coffee cup, only to see the man shoot a smile back at her. “Thanks.” The charming smile made her heart skip a beat.

Xie Lanshan turned the cup, pressing his lips onto the faint lipstick mark on the edge to test the temperature. He looked earnestly into the young woman’s eyes. “Sorry, it’s like I stole a kiss from you.”

As his figure disappeared into the hallway, the two young women were still frozen in place. They each asked the other, “Do you know him?”

Carrying the cup of coffee, Xie Lanshan ran right into Tao Longyue and Ding Li being escorted out by Tracy. Tao Longyue shook his head, then said they would have to come back in two days.

Behind Captain Tao was Li Rui and his bosses. Xie Lanshan wanted to step forward, but Tracy stopped him without hesitation.

He briefly studied the secretary. Her features were covered in bright makeup, a fitted suit jacket wrapped neatly around her waist, and a rose-colored dress highlighted the curves of her fine body. Pulling out the same technique as earlier, he gave her a flirtatious smile, hoping to buy his way into the company with his charms.

Yet this Tracy woman was unfazed. “The managers are all here today. We’re not available to help with the investigation.”

Xie Lanshan had no choice. “I just have one question.”

She finally yielded, though with hesitation. “Follow me.”

Like a gleeful child, Tao Longyue followed behind. He enjoyed seeing Xie Lanshan make a fool of himself in front of a woman again, but then remembered all the things the man had made up about Su Mansheng and whispered into Xie Lanshan ear, “I presume this one’s also a lesbian?”

Xie Lanshan would never admit he’d lost his charm, so he blamed it on others without a second thought. “I bet she has a crush on her boss.”

The floor was quite slippery even in the other areas of the office. As Xie Lanshan slipped in front of the community manager, the paper cup in his hand slid out of his grip and the liquid inside splattered right onto Li Rui’s chest.

The coffee was still hot, so continued skin contact was sure to cause a burn. Instinctively, Li Rui unbuttoned his shirt collar. As he was about to take off the neat shirt, his fingers stopped and pressed it back together.

Noting this unusual behavior, Xie Lanshan grabbed Li Rui’s hand, pulling his shirt open to expose the skin beneath. Under his neck and trailing toward his chest were numerous scratches that were clearly the work of human fingernails.

“We’ve already discovered male DNA from the nails of your ex-girlfriend, Cong Ying’s corpse.” Xie Lanshan narrowed his eyes, but his gaze was sharp and bright. “You better explain where you got these cuts.”

The pair of hands collected from the museum had been too burnt to collect samples from.

He was trying to bluff his way to get a reaction.

(v)

The moment he stepped inside the Hanhai City Municipal Bureau, Li Rui completely lost his cool. He stuttered and shook in fear once seated in the interrogation room, then began to scream and yell after a few questions, insisting he never killed anyone.

Tao Longyue scolded the man, “Everyone who walks in here says the same thing, but the police will determine whether you actually committed murder. No innocent man will be wronged; likewise, we’ll never let evil run free. You better be honest with us; let’s start with your whereabouts during the night of the murder.”

Li Rui took a sip of the hot tea Xiao Liang handed him and finally calmed enough to retrace his memories. “I believe at around 1 P.M. that afternoon, I drove Cong Ying home in my car. We went out to buy a present for her father in the morning because his birthday was coming up, so I figured we should also discuss our marriage with him again. She was wearing a beautiful yellow

Gucci dress I bought for her that day. Her father didn't come home very early, so I spent the afternoon chatting with her mother and grandmother. We even ate together, and the atmosphere was peaceful until her father came home. He was visibly upset the moment he saw me. I'd had some drinks and was a little tipsy. It was also getting late, so I was going to stay the night in the guest room, but that was when her father started getting upset and said she couldn't keep a stranger in the house. I couldn't hold it in any longer and we got into an argument. It was brief, and I walked out the door afterward; Cong Ying ran after me, then we got into an argument too. I even broke up with her, but I don't remember what time it was..."

"It was 11:45 P.M. Your neighbor across the street witnessed the argument you had with your girlfriend," Tao Longyue answered. "But I can't wrap my head around one part of this. We found your résumé online; normally, someone with a track record like yours would be perfect as an in-law, so why was Cong Ying's father so upset with you?"

"My father and Cong Ying's father were from the same town and did business together once. Later, my father fell several million yuan in debt; at the time, it was a huge sum of money and it put a lot of pressure on him. I think the stress made him careless one day. He got into a car accident that took his life. It was an accident, but the insurance company insisted that he was trying to commit insurance fraud. Cong Ying's father was already suspicious of my father, even before he passed away..."

Not following the suspect's logic, Tao Longyue asked, "Even if your father committed suicide or insurance fraud, what does that have anything to do with you?"

"He felt that..." Li Rui's pale lips began to tremble, and he looked pained to admit what he was about to say. "Like father like son. He didn't think I could be trusted either..."

Tao Longyue fell into a brief silence, trying to piece together the connection between the two cases. "You can continue."

Shaking his head, Li Rui let out a bitter laugh. "On top of that, my business had only begun to see some promising revenue these last two years. My mother raised me all by herself since I was young; she was very sickly, so I had to carry my father's debt. It was extremely difficult for us. I hadn't had much luck finding work after graduation, and my business also had a rough start. I think Cong Ying's father might also look down on the poor, so he thought his daughter had better choices since she was young and had a bright future."

"Sure." This was a reasonable explanation. "So your relationship with Cong Zhiming was rocky; he felt that you were sucking up to him and looked down on you due to your background. Even after you became a successful

businessman, he still treated you the same way. So on the night of the murder, you first got into an argument with Cong Zhiming, then his daughter Cong Ying. All of the pent-up anger made you run back into the house and murder her entire family out of revenge, is that right?"

The implication riled up Li Rui, who slammed his hands on the table. "I didn't kill anyone! I didn't!"

Tao Longyue responded in kind, slamming the table as well. "You better tell the truth—admitting to your crimes now could lighten your sentence! Where did you get the scratch marks on your neck and chest? Don't tell me you did it yourself. I won't believe it!"

"I was scratched by someone else, but it wasn't Cong Ying... it... it was... I can't tell you."

"Do you still not understand your situation right now?" Seeing the suspect was still trying to hide, Tao Longyue almost wanted to laugh in frustration. "Six lives—that's enough to warrant a death sentence in our system. If you've got evidence you didn't do it, you better fork that up right now!"

Li Rui's face turned from blue to red until he finally stuttered out that he'd gotten the injuries from cavorting with prostitutes.

Tao Longyue wasn't buying it. "You're a renowned young entrepreneur with plenty of beautiful women lining up behind you. Why would you even need to go down that route to get laid?"

"I broke up with Cong Ying that day, so I dropped by a convenience store to buy some booze afterward. I ended up drunk and wandering the streets. I wasn't sure where I was, but before I could get my bearings, a woman suddenly appeared behind me and dragged me into her room. That was when I realized what she wanted to do and I was desperate to leave; we ended up arguing, and she scratched me in retaliation..." After confessing his darkest and most embarrassing secret, Li Rui found himself surprisingly relieved. "Captain Tao, you're also a man, so I'm sure you can understand where I'm coming from, right...?"

Xiao Liang, who was beside Tao Longyue and documenting the interrogation, gave the latter a look.

"Quit that nonsense. I don't go to places like those. How could I understand?!" Tao Longyue suppressed his boiling blood. "Then what did you do after getting your car? Where did you go?"

"I went back home and parked in a garage near my residence. I have a permanent spot there."

"Why do you have a copy of *The Brink of Light and Dark* on your desk?"

"What is *The Brink of Light and Dark*?" Li Rui was puzzled.

"You've never read it?"

“I work in design, so I often ask my colleagues and employees to buy me art books and other reference materials.” Li Rui looked surprised. “My desk is filled with them—I haven’t had the chance to look through them all.”

“The surveillance footage showed that the day before Cong Ying’s hands and the murder weapon were discovered, you had visited the Crane Museum. Were you not trying to pin the crime on Shen Liufei?”

“Wh-who is Shen Liufei? I...” Once again, Li Rui was on the verge of breaking down. “How many times do I have to say this? I’m merely a designer. I often go to museums to find inspiration. I’ve been to all sorts of museums in and out of the country...”

“Then how are you going to explain that you were caught by the security guard leaving Jing Jiang Grand Garden at three in the morning? The whole family’s dead. What were you doing there all by yourself? Cleaning up and decorating the crime scene?”

“I got a message from Cong Ying at midnight; she wanted me to go pick up my car while her father was asleep because she knew I had work the next day. So I did go back, but I was afraid of waking her father again and went straight down to the underground parking garage. But if I had walked through the front door, I would’ve known that something happened to them. Maybe they could have been saved if I had...” Li Rui’s words cut off and his whimpering cries took over.

An inspection of the records revealed Cong Ying had indeed sent a text message before her death. Investigating the nearby convenience stores, they also confirmed Li Rui had purchased wine on the night of the murder. The employee on shift remembered him—an extremely upset man like a walking corpse, who paid with a hundred-yuan bill and walked off without taking his change.

Yet even if Li Rui had left the house to purchase alcohol, it wasn’t enough to prove he hadn’t returned to commit the crime. The interrogation continued but also ran into a stalemate. Whether it was the strange scratch marks on the man’s chest, the fingerprints left behind on the crime scene and murder weapon, or the witness account about leaving the Cong residence at three in the morning, Captain Tao had more than enough to stir his suspicions. From his years of investigative experience, he was certain this man was the real culprit.

An officer knocked and walked into the room, then whispered something into his ear.

After hearing the message, Captain Tao’s expression brightened. He asked the officer to leave. “The public security department also follows its own code of conduct and procedures. We can’t exhaust a suspect during the questioning phase without hard evidence, so we will release you after twenty-four hours.”

Courtesy came before force. “But I will remind you; our technicians are close to retrieving the data from the Jing Jiang Grand Garden surveillance that night. We’ll be able to tell exactly what time you left: both after you got into the argument with your girlfriend and from the time when you returned; we’ll be able to tell if you’re lying. By then, it’ll be too late to plead for a lighter sentence even if you want to! Think about your options!”

Tao Longyue left the room.

This wasn’t an act, nor was Captain Tao bluffing to scare the suspect; the tech team had spent a sleepless week retrieving and repairing the footage.

While Tao Longyue was interrogating Li Rui, Xie Lanshan was facing his own trials. The last time, he’d handcuffed the forensic sketch artist and dragged the man back to the bureau, the branch chief was so stunned he’d taken it upon himself to ask the wrongly accused artist whether he wanted to stay or leave, allowing the man to make his own decision.

Now, the door to the office opened. Tao Jun personally escorted Shen Liufei out, addressing the artist deferentially despite his own wizened appearance, “I’m sorry for asking you to make a trip over for this, sir.”

Ding Li, who had long been interested in this rumored forensic sketch artist, quickly rose to strike up a conversation with Shen Liufei. She also called him Mr. Shen out of respect, and giddily did so, at that. “Mr. Shen, did you know? They’ve all been talking about you even before you arrived.” Seeing she wasn’t stirring up enough trouble, her shapely eyes narrowed, and she shot a glance toward Xie Lanshan.

“Is that so?” Shen Liufei also glanced at the handsome officer. “What have they all been saying?”

“My senior colleague here said you’re all looks and talk but have no real skills...”

“All looks but no skills.” The corner of Shen Liufei’s lips arched up. “Have you tested your theory?”

“No, but I’d be up for it.” He couldn’t be careless when answering these questions testing his dignity as a man, yet Xie Lanshan captured Shen Liufei’s sharp gaze without breaking a sweat. “How about we test each other out tonight if you’re so concerned? I’ll always welcome you to prove your worth to me in action, Mr. Shen.”

Noticing her senior held some level of reverence toward this new recruit, Ding Li fanned the flames. “Oh, right, he also said you’re a bald old man with wrinkles all over your face and hands, and that you tremble when you walk and cough a lung out when you move...”

Shen Liufei’s gaze remained fixed on Xie Lanshan. It was almost emotionless, without a trace of anger. “You really seem to have a penchant for

letting your mouth run before your brain."

"Not really. It depends on who I'm speaking to." Xie Lanshan grinned. "For nitpickers, I would watch my words and be a bit more careful around them. As for someone with a big heart like you, Mr. Shen, of course anything goes."

He taunted the man with flattery, assuming Shen Liufei wasn't so narrow-minded he couldn't stomach a little teasing. Yet before he could continue his shower of compliments, Ding Li added on the side, "Right, he also said—"

"Shut up." Xie Lanshan wrapped an arm around Ding Li's neck and covered her mouth. "That's enough. A gossiping girl is doomed to never marry."

"Watch your mouth in front of Mr. Shen! If he hadn't been generous enough to put in a good word for you to Chief Wang, you would have been standing at a cross street directing traffic right now!" After scolding Xie Lanshan, Tao Jun finally praised the man. He acknowledged his adopted son had helped capture the suspect. If Li Rui had successfully used his work as an excuse to get off the hook for another two days, the fingernail marks would have disappeared and made the case much more difficult to solve.

As the last order of business, Tao Jun gave an order to Xie Lanshan: to take good care of Mr. Shen tonight as an honorary new recruit of the bureau.

(vi)

Tao Jun had said to treat Shen Liufei well. Xie Lanshan reached a hand into his pocket and realized he had only a few small bills left. He wasn't sure he could survive the next month, let alone treat a guest to a fancy dinner. While he'd received compensation during his last two months of suspension, all of his pay had been sent as reparation to the wife of the butcher.

They got on Shen Liufei's motorcycle, as before. He was no stranger to the treatment the second time around, so Xie Lanshan stopped complaining about sitting in the back seat. He wrapped his arm around the nicely toned waist and took the man to Uncle Tan's food cart. It was still light outside, so Uncle Tan wasn't stopped by the dark cross street and instead had parked his cart near a school.

Xie Lanshan raised an eyebrow at Shen Liufei. "If I'd never seen the wild way you ride your bike, I probably would've taken you out to some full-course French dinner. Now I feel like maybe street food is better for you."

Then, turning to Uncle Tan with a smile, he thoughtfully mentioned they came to pay him a visit knowing the old man was about to leave the city.

Pulling out two plastic chairs, Uncle Tan offered Xie Lanshan a seat. A middle-school couple were feeding each other spicy fish balls and rice noodles in front of his cart. The boy's tongue was sensitive to the hot temperature,

while the spiciness reddened the girl's cheeks; they choked in unison and smiled at each other before wiping off the sweat from each other's faces.

Xie Lanshan suggested buying some alcohol from the convenience store diagonally across the street from the vending cart. Uncle Tan took the offer with a smile and came back quickly with a bottle.

A Kaoliang liquor blend at fifty-three proof, twelve yuan a gram.

The burning alcohol rolled down the throat like chugging a ball of fire. Xie Lanshan coughed a little, not because the booze was too strong but because it wasn't to his taste. The spirit was watery and muddy in his mouth.

"Is it too strong?" A little flustered, Uncle Tan grinned. "This was what you and Captain Tao used to drink whenever you came over in the past."

"That's... ahem... that was because he liked it..." Xie Lanshan's throat was choking in pain; he decided to pin the blame on the absent Captain Tao and cursed. "The guy sure lives like a stray dog."

Rather unbothered, Shen Liufei poured himself a small shot and drank it all. He turned to Xie Lanshan. "I'll treat you to something better next time."

That young couple had finished eating. The boy walked before Uncle Tan and placed a hand in his pocket to pay, then gasped in surprise to say, "Oh no, I'm two yuan short."

Uncle Tan gestured with his hand generously. "It's only two yuan short. Don't worry about it."

Holding the girl's hand, the boy left to go into the convenience store. Within a matter of minutes they walked out, each holding a soda.

Xie Lanshan shook his head at Uncle Tan. "You're going to lose money like that."

The older man gave him a small grin. "They're just kids with only so much money on hand. I should be glad they even bothered to support my little business. I'm a lone man who can live fine on his own as long as there's a roof above my head."

"A lone man?" Out of courtesy, Xie Lanshan chugged half a cup of the liquor despite the taste. "Don't you have a daughter?"

"Oh... ah, right..." Uncle Tan blanked out momentarily before quickly picking up the conversation. "Her business is doing well. She wouldn't care much for this little money from me."

Shen Liufei continued to quietly sit beside Xie Lanshan. Xie Lanshan downed the liquor, but the other's gaze remained on Uncle Tan. Seeing the old man pick up a towel to wipe his sweat, the artist allowed his lips to warmly curl up the slightest bit. Shen Liufei picked up his cup as well and took another sip.

Uncle Tan turned to ask Xie Lanshan, "So, did you guys find the culprit in that mass murder case yet?"

Some online gossiping site had been spreading the news throughout the city over the last two days. Hiding such a large case was almost impossible; rumors spread like wildfire through the public, and a theory about the ritualistic murder had instilled fear in people.

Xie Lanshan answered, “We have a target now—still investigating.”

Uncle Tan asked, “They said that there was a footprint left outside the victim’s house. Don’t you guys have some sort of system at the bureau to check for the culprit based on it?”

Xie Lanshan raised an eyebrow. “Where did you hear that from?”

Uncle Tan laughed. “I ran into Captain Tao yesterday and chatted with him.”

Tao Longyue lived near Xie Lanshan and had a closer relationship with Uncle Tan; it was natural they spoke a little more. Still, Xie Lanshan pretended to be upset and placed the cup down on the table. “That little shit sure loves to tell the whole world about everything.”

Taken aback, Uncle Tan apologized frantically for butting into their business, asking if he’d gotten Captain Tao into trouble.

“Don’t worry. I’m just kidding. We can definitely find the culprit now that the Hunting Net Operation is starting. Once we collect all the footprints and DNA samples from the shady people with no legal citizenship, I’m sure the culprit will be within our reach.” The Hunting Net Operation *would* make it possible to search through a database for this information, but Xie Lanshan didn’t notice Uncle Tan’s hand shiver. As the bright moonlight shone above and cast on the street, Shen Liufei’s eyes caught that faint change of expression. A hint of fleeting alarm flashed across those aged eyes.

A cell phone suddenly rang. Xie Lanshan hesitated at the name before picking it up.

Song Qilian told him she had received a call from the municipal bureau earlier that day asking her how his therapy went. Her response was extremely positive. She hadn’t discovered anything to hinder him from carrying out the duties of a proper police officer, but still advised he continue his therapy sessions.

Song Qilian had clearly kept his nightmare and the way he fled a secret. Though the man himself didn’t think much of it, he wouldn’t know how to explain his behavior to his superiors. Xie Lanshan thanked her playfully, “Sorry for making you break your professional code.”

“You didn’t.” Song Qilian admitted to her own unprofessional conduct. “A single therapy session is usually about fifty to sixty minutes long. No matter how professional or experienced the therapist may be, who can say with confidence that they fully understand a patient they just met?”

Before hanging up, she left one last message for him: *This is a man I've known since I was twelve; I believe in him.*

Even after the other line clicked and was replaced with an automated voice saying the line was busy, Xie Lanshan didn't hang up. He clenched the phone and silently digested those words from Song Qilian.

Yet she had never believed in him back then.

Putting away his cell phone and wiping away the melancholy on his face, Xie Lanshan turned to Uncle Tan with a grin. "It's not that we don't trust you, Uncle Tan, but I can't say any more than what you can find online. We still have our rules and some discipline here in public security."

Shen Liufei didn't seem to believe him. "There's discipline within the public security units?"

"Uncle Tan saved Longyue's life once, back when I was still undercover in the Golden Triangle. He helped Longyue stop a criminal wielding a knife; the captain got stabbed in an artery, and Uncle Tan helped him capture the criminal. The old man never took the reward money the municipal bureau offered, or a medal of honor." Xie Lanshan assumed the man was worried about Tao Longyue exposing the details of the murder. "He's done countless deeds like this in the past. Uncle Tan's virtually a local saint—sometimes he does more to maintain the peace than the police."

"It's nothing. I just happened to see it on the streets and decided to help out since I still have the strength to do so." Uncle Tan wiped more sweat off his face.

"Though speaking of you, Xie Lanshan deceived his way into a community manager's presence and took a suspect in by force. That's definitely not what a disciplined policeman should do." Uncle Tan had already heard about the episode and how Xie Lanshan forced Li Rui to expose himself in front of his managers.

"I'd tasted the coffee already. It wasn't even that hot anymore." Xie Lanshan didn't feel a bit guilty over his actions. "Besides, my hand slipped."

Shen Liufei asked, "How did you know there would be scratch marks on Li Rui's chest?"

"I had a dream about it and decided to look at it from a different perspective. I figured if I was the culprit who didn't have enough time to clean out all the DNA samples from under my victim's fingernails and didn't have the means to destroy evidence by getting rid of the corpse, cutting the victim's hands off was the most plausible thing to do. This would also distract the investigation, killing two birds with one stone."

Shen Liufei muttered, "You think Li Rui is the culprit?"

Xie Lanshan questioned back, "What does the professional have to say about it then?"

“Li Rui’s sex, age, professional background, and physical appearance fit my profiling of the culprit, except in one most important aspect—”

Xie Lanshan followed up with good chemistry. “His excuses are too weak. The way he presented himself in the interrogation room didn’t seem like a careful and calculating culprit.”

Shen Liufei mused with a faint smile. “Don’t forget there’s also a woman.”

Xie Lanshan wasn’t as careless as Tao Longyue and wouldn’t discuss the case in detail with an outsider around. “Let’s not discuss the case tonight—how about we talk about you? Two accidental encounters. I really don’t think it’s a coincidence.”

Without denying it, Shen Liufei poured himself another half cup. “I’ve said before I’m naturally attracted to dark and negative emotions.”

“What kind of negative emotions can I have?” Shrugging casually, Xie Lanshan rejected the claim. “Please, I’m a cop. If I were to have any evil thoughts, I wouldn’t be able to feed myself.”

“An antidrug enforcement hero who made great sacrifices when he was suspected as a spy for the drug lord by his own comrades. Shaking up the drug hub didn’t warrant a promotion. Saving a life only earned you a suspension from your post.” Shen Liufei looked at Xie Lanshan coldly, fixing his gaze on the officer. “Perhaps it would be better to just die on the front lines at this point.”

“You know about that too?” Xie Lanshan laughed. “Did you also read it on some internet forum?”

“I’ve heard a bit about your deeds.” Shen Liufei took a sip and placed the cup down. “Are you upset?”

Xie Lanshan should have said he held no grudges.

People often placed a higher moral standard on police officers than the average man; an officer had to understand the importance of the greater good and justice, have clear morals, and shoulder responsibility for their actions. It was almost as if they were not allowed to complain.

A deeply buried sense of loneliness suddenly engulfed him. “Big bro, I’m drunk.” Lowering his head, Xie Lanshan pressed his forehead on Shen Liufei’s shoulder. “Let me borrow a shoulder to lean on.”

The warmth of the body passed through their clothing, along with a faint scent—he couldn’t tell if it was cologne or shower gel. Perhaps this distant smell was the natural scent of the artist.

“Big brother” had become an established term in his vocabulary; it didn’t matter whether he continued to refer to the artist as a fake family member. He’d only meant it as a joke because he was tipsy from the alcohol, but for some reason, the scent on Shen Liufei felt familiar and calming.

A row of red wildflowers bloomed throughout the entire street, some short, some tall, but all imbuing the land with a sense of vitality. A handful of moths fluttered beneath the dim yellow streetlights, circling amongst themselves but without bothering each other. A ray of white moonlight glinted across the cement ground; a gentle breeze blew by under the faint glow.

Xie Lanshan had been suffering from insomnia from his headaches for a while now and hadn't truly gotten much rest. Now, as his head leaned on Shen Liufei's shoulder, he actually fell asleep.

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Once he finished Li Rui's questioning, Tao Longyue walked out of the interrogation room when it was about time to clock out. Captain Tao of the homicide and violent crime unit hadn't earned his name by yelling his way through the job. He had a hand in delegating work to his subordinates and cleanly distributed the work among the team to collect evidence.

He delegated some tasks to the diligent Xiao Liang. "Go create the report of Li Rui's questioning first and then look into his father, Li Xiangqian's, insurance fraud case. I bet this shit's still hiding some stuff from us. His actual motive won't be as simple as we see here."

He then turned to the honest and hardworking Xiao Zhang. "Aside from Li Rui's fingerprints, which we've successfully matched on the murder weapon, the other fingerprints still haven't been identified. Those might be from the accomplice, the woman who burned down the surveillance room. The fingerprints were taken from the knife handle and aren't a flat sample, so they're already smudged and incomplete. It won't be easy to identify with the automated system we have, so you have to be a bit more diligent."

He turned to the courageous and dependable Xiao Jiao. "Continue looking into the sexual harassment case from Cong Ying's previous company. Pay special attention to the managers' wives, daughters, or other female family members and match the footprints. It's very likely that the woman who set the surveillance room on fire is among them."

Then he turned to the new recruit, Ding Li. "Continue following up with the tech department. Report to me immediately once the surveillance data is restored; if Li is lying, we'll be able to tell!"

The rest of the team asked, "What about you?"

"I'm going to the criminal institute's forensic lab; there are some issues with the autopsy I need to double-check on with Doctor Su." After his stern words, Captain Tao left without a second look. "Don't call me tonight unless someone finds an important breakthrough related to this case."

While Officer Xie and Mr. Shen were sipping cheap wine in front of Uncle Tan's little vending cart, Captain Tao invited Doctor Su to a famous, high-end restaurant in Hanhai City. The average price range was close to a thousand yuan per person for a meal, and the restaurant itself replete with elegance. A man unwilling to make sacrifices wouldn't capture his prey. Knowing what he was after, Captain Tao carefully dressed himself up for the occasion. He even touched up the menacing scar beside his eyebrows to be less visible.

He didn't expect Su Mansheng to be a regular at the restaurant. The two sat near a cabinet of red wine. A tall and handsome French chef walked out from the half-open kitchen area to greet them. He first gave a friendly kiss on the cheek to Su Mansheng, then chatted with her in French. Su Mansheng spoke fluently with nearly no accent.

The words became gibberish in Tao Longyue's ears. He had no choice but to sit and sip his carbonated drink. The more he looked at the Frenchman, the more he grew antsy, not realizing his face was gradually growing the deep color of an eggplant.

When the Frenchman finally left, Tao Longyue swallowed back his bile and complimented Su Mansheng. "Your French is very good."

"It's nothing, really," Su Mansheng said calmly. "My grandmother is French."

"No wonder!" With a small gasp, Tao Longyue stared at Su Mansheng's face, noticing her eyes were quite similar to Xie Lanshan. Both shared similar sharp features, clearly of mixed ethnicity, clearly standing out even amongst a crowd. "You're like a-Lan. Neither of you look like stereotypical Asians. Except he's a factory default and doesn't have the same kind of elegance as you." Xie Lanshan didn't bother badmouthing him, so Tao Longyue also didn't hold back the insults on his end. At the end of the day, they both knew their bickering and mutual jabs were as natural as breathing.

A woman at the table beside them hadn't stopped talking since she walked into the restaurant; the whiny tone of her voice continued to fill the space. Tao Longyue turned his head to shoot a quick glance at her. She was a pretty young woman, but the act was a little too fake. Su Mansheng sitting in front of him was much more gallant and charming. Her beauty transcended modern trends.

Before the main course could be served, Captain Tao's date at dusk with a beauty—an event incredibly rare for him—was interrupted; it was Ding Li.

Tao Longyue was ready to blow up the moment he picked up the phone but suppressed the urge with his date within reach. "What's up?"

Ding Li reported the hardware had been successfully restored and fixed. The surveillance footage from the night of the Jing Jiang Grand Garden murder case had been extracted.

Sunlight shone through the windows. On the bed inside the Xie residence, a ringtone woke Xie Lanshan. He reached for his phone and noticed it was already almost nine in the morning. No horrifying murder scene, no woman dressed in white, no floor filled with blood. He'd gotten an unusually tranquil night of peaceful and serene sleep.

To refresh himself, Xie Lanshan took a quick shower in the bathroom and splashed some cold water over his face. He looked up into the mirror in an attempt to recall what had happened last night after dinner. Shen Liufei must have taken him home. He might have slept well last night, but he hadn't lost all sense of the outside world. As he'd fallen into his slumber, someone had touched his face, a soft and gentle caress tracing from the arch of his eyebrows down to the corner of his eyes. The hand searched from the bridge of his nose to the corner of his lips before gently coming to rest in his hair.

It had been comforting.

Over the phone, Tao Longyue yelled at him, saying there was a major breakthrough in the case and he needed to hurry to the municipal bureau.

Xie Lanshan's stomach was empty. He had been so consumed with the alcohol last night, he hadn't eaten much. As he stepped onto the street, he naturally searched for Uncle Tan's pancake stall.

The old man wasn't out that day.

By the time Xie Lanshan walked into the homicide and violent crime office, the employees had been surrounding the tech team's computers all night. Surveillance covered the residential area; once the footage was restored, the culprit would have no way to escape their eyes. From the footage, Li Rui had indeed brought Cong Ying back home at around 1 P.M.

After his car drove in from the back door of the mansion, it went straight down to the underground garage. At 11:40 P.M., the young couple dashed out the door, getting into a heated argument in front of the residence. Li Rui's voice was loud and aggressive; Cong Ying kept her face covered, crying throughout it all. By 11:45 P.M., Li Rui turned and left the house in anger. He walked right out of Jing Jiang Grand Garden and did not return to the residence to murder the Cong family.

Xie Lanshan and Tao Longyue exchanged a glance with each other; was it really not him?

Soon after, another suspect appeared. At around 12 A.M., someone drove a bike over to deliver supper to the Cong family residence. It was cloudy and sprinkling that night; the individual wore a biker jacket marked by a recognizable delivery company with a matching helmet. Seeming quite nervous, the person held the box and glanced around in front of the door, rubbing their hands together. They turned their head to face the surveillance camera, leaving a clear shot of their face.

A technician paused the screen and enlarged the image. Tao Longyue saw the face. “Zhang Yuchun?!”

Recalling the boxes of takeout food piled inside Cong Ying’s house, the investigators soon recognized this Zhang Yuchun was a regular the family would not be suspicious of. On the screen, the young man didn’t leave after making the delivery. Instead, he was invited inside the house by someone. The camera couldn’t capture what happened within, but it faithfully recorded the time he left the house—1 A.M.

He stayed a whole hour inside the Cong family residence.

When he came out, Zhang Yuchun was still wearing his helmet and biker jacket, looking lost as he attempted to hide from something. He quickly got back onto his bike and left the scene.

At around 2 A.M., an uncommon storm showered down and cleaned his footprints and bike tracks from the ground.

The rest of the footage was blank because someone had set it all aflame. Li Rui had not reappeared in Jing Jiang Grand Garden throughout the entire recording.

Tao Longyue slapped his own leg as he watched the footage. “Go find this delivery company and capture the suspect—get Zhang Yuchun!”

Tao Longyue was both frustrated and reflective during the trip to the company. His body shook from the mix of these strong emotions. He freed a hand from the steering wheel to pull out a pack of cigarettes, only to see the same pack of Old China from Zhang Yuchun. He crushed it in his fist out of anger. The man also repeated the same words, “You sure can’t stop eating shit once you’ve tasted it! If I capture the bastard, I swear I’m going to destroy him.”

He had helped Zhang Yuchun during that illegal tobacco incident, and Captain Tao’s recommendation had made his delivery position possible.

In contrast to Tao Longyue’s boiling anger, Xie Lanshan kept his opinions on the matter to himself. He had reached a conclusion with Shen Liufei last night: the culprit must be a tall, sly, and extremely calculating man. In their combined profiling, they determined the person would have a clean background, an unassuming face, higher education, and high social status, yet Zhang Yuchun was barely over 170 centimeters and hadn’t graduated from middle school. How could someone like him possibly follow a niche art book like *The Brink of Light and Dark* to commit murder?

“Hey, Ol’ Tao,” Xie Lanshan said, “it’s a bit too early to draw conclusions right now. Shen Liufei and I think—”

“Since when did you two get so close? The surveillance footage doesn’t lie, the culprit must be that kid,” Tao Longyue harshly interrupted Xie Lanshan. He was still deep in regret that his failure in judging character came at the cost

of six innocent lives.

At the takeout station, the employees preparing to take orders didn't seem at all surprised by the sudden appearance of the police. Only a handful of employees took care of deliveries in the area; about ten to twenty people during the day and eight at night. Because it was a high-end residential community, few had the habit of ordering deliveries in the middle of the night. The investigators checked the orders placed from the internal records of the system. Cong Ying had indeed placed an order with her cell phone at 11:20 P.M. on the night of the murder. The order included roasted meat and beer.

An older delivery man said he was the one who received it, but Zhang Yuchun insisted he make the delivery. It was raining, and the old man's knee ached, so he had agreed.

Another delivery person chimed in, "If he knew that the deliveries we managed to catch were to Jing Jiang Grand Garden, Zhang Yuchun would always volunteer. He doesn't get paid anyway, and it's still counted in our paycheck, so we all let him handle it."

Tao Longyue frowned. "Why?"

"Why? He's interested in that girl who lives there, of course. We're always laughing that his dream is impossible, but he didn't find any issues and happily enjoyed his little crush. The girl's certainly nice, though. She's not only pretty but also has a kind heart. When Little Zhang started delivering stuff for us, he tripped all over himself during a storm and completely spilled the girl's order, but she didn't file a complaint on him. She even gave him a hot towel and invited him to rest in her house." The delivery person shook his head and sighed. "We all thought it was weird Little Zhang suddenly resigned, but we couldn't have imagined he would do something like this."

Tao Longyue was agitated. "If you all knew people died in Jing Jiang Grand Garden and noticed Zhang Yuchun acting strange, why didn't you report it to the cops?"

"We're living paycheck to paycheck and have no time to worry about these things. Most of us just thought those were online rumors." The employees were surprised by the policeman's harshness. Even as they cooperated, the man still scolded them. They wanted to walk away, but Captain Tao managed to stop them to dig more into Zhang Yuchun's past.

One detail made an impression on Xie Lanshan. Not long ago, another delivery person from the same station had lost five thousand yuan withdrawn from a bank. Everyone assumed Zhang Yuchun had stolen it, yet even after discovering the person had misplaced their own money, no one had apologized to Zhang Yuchun. They all assumed it was natural and right to suspect someone like him. Zhang Yuchun had broken the law before and done drugs; his fingerprints had already been collected and stored in the criminal profile

database of the public security department.

Meanwhile, after long and hard hours of work from the tech department, the remaining fingerprints on the murder weapon were retrieved. Comparing them to available data confirmed they belonged to Zhang Yuchun.

Chase and Run

Tao Longyue left the delivery station with Zhang Yuchun's address and dashed toward the apartment, only to find the suspect had already left the house.

Following behind, Xie Lanshan took a quick tour around the apartment. Zhang Yuchun lived alone in a studio. It was about twenty square meters in size and on the ground level. The damp and dark space had only a light layer of paint over the walls that was already growing mold.

The individual living here was quite a sloppy person; his stove was littered with salt and sugar containers. Instant noodle boxes and beer cans were tossed carelessly to the side. On the single bed was a light gray towel with white stains—the remnants after a lonely man had cleaned himself up.

Frowning, Xie Lanshan continued searching elsewhere. A few books rested on Zhang Yuchun's bed stand. These were common fortune-telling books and adult reading materials found at street vendors. Reading books with actual words in his spare time would have been quite a feat for a man who hadn't finished middle school. Something like *The Brink of Light and Dark* would be a nonsensical tongue twister to him.

This was nothing like Shen Liufei's profile.

Xie Lanshan recalled the scene of the murder. The culprit had arranged the corpses in an organized manner so when rigor mortis occurred, the bodies would remain in place—like sculptures. The placement had been precise down to the detail, reenacting the entire original painting with an eerie but captivating sense of artistry.

He brought up his suspicion to Tao Longyue. The latter responded without a doubt. "Cong Ying was Shen Liufei's student with a copy of his book in her house. Maybe Zhang Yuchun saw the book after he murdered the family and decided last minute to mimic the artwork."

The investigators interviewed Zhang Yuchun's neighbors. A family living above him said they had seen Zhang Yuchun return home two days ago. Yet when they called to him, he hadn't responded and left quickly after picking up things from his apartment. He then disappeared, never to be heard from again.

"He has no reason to run and hide if he didn't kill anyone." Tao Longyue grew more certain: Zhang Yuchun was a prime suspect. Indeed, the young man had a rap sheet with plenty of petty crimes and was even a drug addict. His unrequited feelings for Cong Ying were a mere delusion, creating the perfect

motive for murder.

"We've confirmed that the suspect, Zhang Yuchun, has escaped." Tao Longyue ordered Ding Li to request a warrant with a wanted reward notice for Zhang Yuchun from the higher-ups.

Xie Lanshan made a note of the restaurant Cong Ying had placed her last delivery order from, a grill called Chaozhou's Best located nearby Jing Jiang Grand Garden. The humble little place in the elite residential area was less than five minutes away from the house. The tablet connected to the system from the delivery station could retrieve all of Cong Ying's past orders, but this was the first time she had ordered from them.

Xie Lanshan walked into the establishment and flashed his badge. He figured the boss would recall the specific order made late at night when no one had been around.

The boss said the rose-oil chicken had been sold out for the day, so he'd called to ask if the customer wanted to change their order. The question had earned a frustrated response from the customer: "I don't care what you change it to, but hurry up—if it's late, I'll file a complaint!" The tone of her voice had been rushed and aggressive, followed by a similarly harsh hangup.

Xie Lanshan was puzzled. Cong Ying had been described as quiet, reserved, well mannered, and many other similar adjectives. Why was she acting like a different person the night of the murder?

Perhaps the person who'd picked up the call wasn't Cong Ying.

Unfortunately, the next two days weren't a good time to discuss this case in depth with Tao Longyue. The captain was boiling in anger like a land mine and ready to explode at any moment. Any attempts at discussion earned comments such as, "Criminal profiling is unreliable," and "Evidence is the only thing that can be trusted." Forensic reports wouldn't lie, surveillance footage showed only the truth, and the fingerprints on the murder weapon were more than enough proof. During the time of Cong Ying's death, only Zhang Yuchun had been at the scene of the crime.

While Xie Lanshan also agreed, too many unanswered questions lingered over the case as a whole. He pondered for a while, then took out his phone to call Shen Liufei. Xie Lanshan said cordially, "I believe a certain Mr. Shen said he was going to treat me to a drink; can I still take him up on that offer?"

Shen Liufei's response was a stolid, "I'll send you the address."

Having a good guess as to why they were meeting, Shen Liufei didn't name a public location, which wouldn't have been fit to discuss the case. Instead, they met at Shen Liufei's residence.

At dusk, neon lights glowed from the business district a few blocks past the residential area. From Shen Liufei's window, it looked like a sea of illuminating beams.

The two men didn't jump right into the case but instead started with some drinks. Shen Liufei produced two bottles of red wine for Xie Lanshan, who carefully savored the red wine with his eyes closed. A complex and unique fruity flavor, floral scent, and smoky texture mixed with a hint of dryness; the contrasting tastes clashed on his tongue and left a lasting aftertaste. It was indeed a top-notch wine.

Shen Liufei also picked up his wineglass to take a small sip. "How is it?"

Xie Lanshan placed his wineglass down. "Latour."

Shen Liufei didn't deny it. "What year?"

Xie Lanshan pondered slightly. "1986."

A slight hint of surprise flashed across Shen Liufei's eyes. "How did you know?"

"Just a blind guess." Despite his humble comments, Xie Lanshan was quite well versed in luxury red wines. "The texture feels at least over thirty years of age, and considering Bordeaux's curse of the sevens, I just took a wild guess at '86."

"Dinner's ready." Smiling, Shen Liufei walked into the kitchen. His at-home attire was quite casual; the white cotton shirt had only one button intact. His sleeves were rolled up without much care. The exposed tattoo twined like a rose vine up from his left chest toward his neck.

Xie Lanshan couldn't help but laugh at the handful of iced oysters. "Raw oysters and red wine—you know that's what they call a recipe for a dinner date with a little extra service at night."

Shen Liufei didn't respond to the dirty joke. "Delivered by air from France this morning. Have a taste."

The oysters were large and delicious. The faint brine of the ocean carried a uniquely sweet flavor; Xie Lanshan downed over half of the plate. While he was pondering whether he wanted another one, his expression suddenly changed. His face paled. He started breathing heavily and more frantically. Soon, he was pounding on his own chest. "I... I don't think I can breathe..."

The reaction arrived like a storm, putting Xie Lanshan in absolute shock. Thankfully, Shen Liufei acted immediately and carried him to the bedroom to lie on the bed.

He leaned down, held up Xie Lanshan's chin, and lowered his head to press his mouth on top of the patient's, giving him CPR. Shen Liufei performed mouth-to-mouth for nearly a whole minute, keeping a normal rhythm until Xie Lanshan's symptoms wore off. The man's breathing was back to normal, but his face was still pale.

"You're allergic to shellfish." Shen Liufei offered his diagnosis before standing back up to grab medication.

He had an open-air plan, so no doors separated the living and bedroom areas, allowing one to travel around freely. Once Shen Liufei left, Xie Lanshan finally caught his breath and couldn't hold in his curiosity. He got up from the bed to wander around the room.

Beside the window was a wooden easel covered with a layer of white cloth. It was clear there was a large painting beneath the cover.

The natural troublemaker inside him tingled. Xie Lanshan pulled the white cloth down, only to almost lose his breath once again. He had prepared himself for another gory, violent, and dark painting; little did he expect to see his own face.

Shen Liufei knocked on the wall lightly, reminding him it was not decent to wander into other people's private zones.

Turning his head, Xie Lanshan gave an excuse without batting an eyelid. "I didn't touch your drawing. The wind blew it off. It must have been curious."

Unperturbed, Shen Liufei simply handed the cup of water and allergy medication in his hand to Xie Lanshan. "You'll feel better after taking some medicine."

Xie Lanshan downed both without a word, then rested on the bed for a while and finally felt the effects kicking in.

Opening his eyes, he turned his gaze back to the painting of himself. "So, you're not gonna explain it?"

"Work purposes." Like his response the first time they'd met in the movie theater, Shen Liufei said calmly, "Sometimes I would sit by a busy street and draw a stranger all day."

That was quite the answer; Xie Lanshan had already seen many portraits and sketches of people in Shen Liufei's house. For a forensic sketch artist, drawing different faces maintained their professional skills and observing nuanced expressions was part of continuous practice.

"Pretty decent drawing." Xie Lanshan pressed his lips together into a small pout. "But the hair's too long."

In the unfinished oil painting, his hair was almost down to his shoulders, which was clearly a hairstyle not allowed on a cop.

Shen Liufei leaned in, caressing the latter's cheek. His long and cold fingers ran through the man's sideburns. "You'd look better with your hair grown out."

This gesture pulled the two in extremely close. It was at the tail end of dusk; a reddish glow cast from the window onto the floor. The vibrant but amorous light blurred the distance between the two men. They stared into each other's eyes, infinitely close but also distant. The fragrance of the red wine hung in the air.

Recalling the two had touched mouths earlier during the CPR, Xie Lanshan's gaze instinctively fell on Shen Liufei's lips. They were on the thin side but finely shaped and defined in a way suiting the man's aura.

Those lips must be nice to kiss, he thought.

Half-jokingly and half-teasing, Xie Lanshan didn't back away and instead advanced. He bit down on his lower lip, tilted his head slightly, and nuzzled his cheek on the other's palm. "I look best when I'm fully exposed."

Shen Liufei held Xie Lanshan's face in his hand. His fingers brushed across the top of the man's lips, then he pressed his thumb down and parted them to study his teeth, gently rubbing his finger on them.

His expression was solemn, with no sign of any emotion, but his eyes were muddied under the dim light, like a spark of fire remaining lit in deserted ground.

Along with the movement of Shen Liufei's fingers, a spark of shock in Xie Lanshan's back electrified his body, shooting even up to his head. He had felt this same touch the night before when he was asleep—the one that was strangely comforting and pleasant.

Shen Liufei lifted his lip slightly. "I'll have to see and judge for myself."

The ring of a cell phone broke this awkwardly flirtatious atmosphere, and the two once again distanced themselves; Xie Lanshan picked up the phone while Shen Liufei continued to drink his wine.

"I've been looking for you, damn it!" Tao Longyue yelled over the phone in his characteristic authoritative tone. "Get your ass here quickly—we just got a public report and found that bastard Zhang Yuchun!"

(ii)

Xie Lanshan placed his phone down and dashed toward the door. Shen Liufei stood up immediately. "I'll go with you."

Xie Lanshan offered a thankful grin. "You're my ride."

His expression slightly melancholic, Shen Liufei nodded slightly. "Tell me everything we know about the suspect so far."

Once the Rank B order for arrest was made public, it didn't take long for someone to report to the authorities. The wanted notice offered fifty thousand yuan in cash for anyone who reported evidence that significantly aided in apprehending the suspect and one hundred thousand yuan for anyone who captured said suspect. Zhang Yuchun had been hiding for days, only to be discovered by a poor middle-aged woman. She was a ferocious mother who wanted to transfer her son to a better school, but the sponsorship fee was a hundred thousand yuan. After she reported Zhang Yuchun's hiding spot to the police, she hid in the corner to spy on him. The more she studied the short and

weak-looking man, the more she felt she could bring him down on her own.

The woman understood she was facing the suspect of a horrible mass murder case who'd taken six lives with his own two hands, and that acting rashly would be unwise. But then she thought about how much effort she had put into maintaining her home, the dirty roads and broken infrastructure outside, the cold rice and leftover plastic utensils at home, and the cash reward that could change her son's future... The blood inside her boiled as her head throbbed in excitement.

She picked up a sharp steel bar. Then, like a leopard ready to catch dinner for her cub, the woman slowly walked toward the suspect.

By the time Xie Lanshan arrived, Zhang Yuchun had already been surrounded, but the young man held a hostage in his arms. The sharp steel pole pointed at a middle-aged woman: the mother.

It was already dark; the abandoned factory Zhang Yuchun had chosen for his hiding place looked even more eerie under the shadows and the surrounding trees outside loomed overhead. Some of the branches even crawled along the main building, while other, smaller branches spread out menacingly from the walls. The moonlight shone through the cracks between the tree branches and windows, cutting through the empty space into the abandoned factory.

The old factory was dilapidated. Plastic bags and long strips of cloth hung from the exposed beam of the structure like phantoms of the night.

It was hard to see.

Zhang Yuchun was a little less than 170 centimeters in height. The middle-aged woman, about the same height, shielded the young man perfectly behind her, blocking off all ideal angles for a shot. Tao Longyue first attempted to console the young man before hammering down with authority. He spoke kindly but firmly, ordering the suspect to drop the weapon. However, Zhang Yuchun was on the brink of madness. No matter how much Tao Longyue tried to talk to him, the young man refused to let the hostage go. The steel pole in his hand pressed into the hostage's neck, drawing a bloody slit across the skin.

No cop wished to see a double-bind situation. The suspect hadn't been officially convicted but was currently holding a hostage; the hostage was waiting to be rescued. They couldn't decide whether to pull the trigger or how to aim. If the rescue failed, an injured hostage would mean another mark of misconduct on their records. If the rescue was a success, people would still question why the cops had fatally shot the suspect. No one could imagine these uniforms were like shackles forcing them to gamble the life of a hostage in these dangerous situations. An injured suspect could act irrationally; thus, it was often safer to shoot to kill.

Even though Xie Lanshan had returned to his post, his gun was still confiscated. He reached toward Xiao Liang, whose gun was pointed at the suspect. “Give me the gun.”

Xiao Liang couldn’t understand it. “Xie Lanshan, you were just punished for misconduct. Don’t be rash.”

All the cops on-site would have given anything to throw away their gun, so the officer couldn’t understand why Xie Lanshan would willingly choose to take the trigger and make the same horrible decision twice.

“Can you guarantee you will be able to shoot down the suspect without hurting the hostage, even in this poor lighting?” Xie Lanshan’s gazed fixed on Xiao Liang. “I can.”

“But...” Though Xiao Liang hesitated, he handed his gun over.

“The safety of the hostage is top priority.” Xie Lanshan took aim toward Zhang Yuchun. His expression was exceptionally grave and stern. “As for whether I’ll be held accountable for the consequences later—that’s not what we should be concerned about right now.”

A drop of sweat rolled down Xie Lanshan’s forehead. His eyes narrowed, searching carefully for the perfect angle to shoot the culprit down. The countless points of doubt still hadn’t convinced him that Zhang Yuchun was the true culprit. However, if the young man wouldn’t listen to reason and hurt the hostage because he lost his cool, Xie Lanshan would have no choice but to shoot.

A hand suddenly pressed on his wrist as he held the gun. The warmth and force beneath his palm were calming, instantly alleviating the tension in his shoulders. Shen Liufei said, “Let me handle this.”

“I don’t know what happened that day,” Zhang Yuchun whimpered. “I blacked out the moment I walked in...” Everything that happened after he had stepped through the door had been so surreal, even the young man himself couldn’t believe his own eyes. Seeing Shen Liufei walk out through the barricade of police, Zhang Yuchun suddenly cried out in horror, “Nobody will believe me anyway! You all think I copied a painting and killed Miss Cong’s entire family!”

“I believe you.” Shen Liufei raised both of his hands to signal he had no weapon. “I’m the artist of that painting.”

“You’re not a cop—who gives a shit if you believe me or not!” Zhang Yuchun’s hands shook; the hostage began crying in pain and tears streamed down her face.

“I’m an advisor the municipality hired.” To prevent further agitating Zhang Yuchun, Shen Liufei stopped walking. “They will listen to me.”

“I don’t fucking believe you!” Zhang Yuchun was still trembling in fear. His long history of others rolling their eyes at him, discriminating against him,

and misunderstanding him made believing in anyone near impossible. That was especially true of this fine gentleman before him, who appeared to have come from the complete opposite background. “How could someone like you believe in a former drug addict with a criminal record like me?!” Since he had been falsely accused of killing a family of six, killing the hostage in his hands right now wouldn’t even be much anyway.

“You fool, do you still not understand?” Shen Liufei, the one who was supposedly so elegant and classy, suddenly cursed out loud and pulled open his collared shirt. Then, to bring himself closer to Zhang Yuchun, he said a single word: *us*. “We’re the same. I’m the same as you.”

The police’s cell phone lights illuminated the tattoos on Shen Liufei’s chest; upon closer inspection, Zhang Yuchun noticed the many horrific scars.

They were obscene and complex—almost shockingly so.

Stab wounds, bullet holes, even scars from explosions—regardless of what had caused them, a traditionally “good person” wouldn’t carry such wounds.

“It’s been two years and ten months since you walked out of the rehabilitation center, yet every time you register your name in any public place, the police always come over and force a urine test on you. Even back in your hometown, all of your childhood friends have already started their own families with stable jobs. You envy them and want the same life, yet you can’t bring yourself to go back home to see them, fearing your parents will still look at you how they look at a drug addict. In the city, you can’t find a willing roommate for a former criminal, but you also don’t want to go back to find your old druggie pals again. It’s certainly more expensive to rent a place on your own, but it’s still better than dealing with constant discrimination and eye-rolling...” Shen Liufei walked slowly over to Zhang Yuchun. “You have been all alone this whole time, despite your efforts to get close to those around you. They always eye you with suspicion, even over little things such as a missing wallet...”

When Zhang Yuchun found out about the Cong family murder case, he had wanted to discuss it with his colleagues at the delivery station—that was, until he overheard them discuss reporting him because he didn’t deserve to even gaze upon a girl like Cong Ying. Because a drug addict would always be a drug addict.

Zhang Yuchun’s emotions had gone from shock to anger, then finally with a heavy heart, he resigned his job and planned on leaving. He didn’t think he would really be treated like a murder suspect, nor that the order for an arrest would come so quickly.

“Even if you were often wronged, even if life was difficult, you still insisted on not selling tobacco to underage kids. Even if a huge business opportunity arose, you remained stubborn and believed they deserved a

different future than the life you had led. You were thankful for that girl who handed you a hot towel during a storm. She brought the most kindness and acceptance to you in your life, through that one and only beautiful encounter. How could you possibly take her life in such a horrific way...”

Recalling that beautiful and kind young woman, Zhang Yuchun’s hands trembled; tears welled up in his eyes.

“Even this woman you’re holding hostage right now—you don’t truly mean to harm her. You know she’s merely a mother who gambled her life for her child. She’s just like you, a person struggling at the bottom of society, holding on to a dream for a better and more beautiful existence...” Shen Liufei quickly analyzed the hostage based on her physical appearance and clothing, then continued walking toward Zhang Yuchun. His voice was calm. His footsteps were also slow and careful so as not to provoke the suspect before him. “I felt the same helplessness as you in the past. I know your pain all too well. The authorities will never let go of any criminal, but they will also never wrong any good person—especially a person working to move on from their past to a better future.”

Tears finally rolled down Zhang Yuchun’s cheeks.

Shen Liufei stopped in front of Zhang Yuchun. Even though the suspect had let go of the hostage and opened himself to numerous opportunities for attack, the young advisor didn’t apprehend the suspect with his overpowering force or height. Instead, he held out a hand. Leaning forward, Shen Liufei looked into the other’s eyes. “Please trust me.”

Zhang Yuchun gave up on fighting against the police. He allowed himself to be taken. The forces rushed forward and took away the silent suspect.

“You just... you said you...” Tao Longyue choked up. Shen Liufei’s earlier words had been swathed in emotion, as if he had truly experienced such a horrific past. While Zhang Yuchun was stunned, the captain also almost believed it to be true.

“It’s a technique in negotiation.” Shen Liufei smiled courteously while speaking words that were anything but polite. “What, would you like me to take a urine test too, Captain Tao?”

With this happy ending, a thousand kilograms of weight were lifted off everyone’s shoulders; Xie Lanshan quietly let out a long sigh of relief. He handed the gun back to Xiao Liang and lifted an eyebrow at Shen Liufei. “I can help with that.”

(iii)

Zhang Yuchun was taken back to the interrogation room inside the municipal bureau, where he sat silent and still. He heard from somewhere that

keeping his mouth shut was the best way to stay out of jail. Tao Longyue brought out pieces of hard evidence. In fear of saying the wrong words and not having anyone believe him, he used up his last bit of sense and make a bad decision: resisting with a hunger strike.

Questioning a crime suspect required the presence of two officers. Xie Lanshan walked into the interrogation room with two large bowls in hand and turned his chin toward Xiao Liang. “You, out.”

A strong and fresh aroma filled the room. The dish was a specialty from Zhang Yuchun’s old hometown, sour bamboo shoot with broiled fish. The shoots were refreshingly sour, and the fish smooth and perfectly cooked.

Tao Longyue scolded Xie Lanshan. “What are you doing? This is against the rules!”

“I’m hungry. Listen, I haven’t even gotten a chance to eat since the investigation started.” Xie Lanshan invited himself to sit down and pushed the bowl a little closer to Zhang Yuchun. “Rules are dead, but people are not. Carry on.”

“You said you passed out the moment you walked inside; how is that possible?! Are you trying to say that the surveillance caught you sleepwalking —”

A large slurp came from beside him. Xie Lanshan had taken a sip of the alluring and golden fish broth. “Delicious.”

The man was usually more refined and wouldn’t make such loud noises. Rolling his eyes, Tao Longyue continued to fire questions at Zhang Yuchun. “You’ve already decided to come in with us, so you better confess now. Did you not see the writing on the walls when you walked in? Lenience to the confessor, punishment to the uncooperative.”

Zhang Yuchun’s lips moved slightly, but as Tao Longyue pointed at the wall behind him, he swallowed back those words. The silence stretched on.

“The evidence has already—”

Another loud “slurp” interrupted him. Tao Longyue glared at his side. “Xie Lanshan!”

“Boss, your three reds rice bowl is here.” Joining in on the rule-breaking, Ding Li walked into the interrogation room and placed a ceramic bowl on the table. Inside were tomatoes, pork, and red chili pepper to create the “three reds” on top of the white rice. The soup broth was bright red and enticing, except the meat was cut slightly unevenly, making it look like a less than appealing dish.

Hunger followed him with the third question; the aroma of the dish teased the drool from Zhang Yuchun’s empty mouth. He stuck his neck out to look up at the table.

Slowly, Xie Lanshan mixed the soup broth in with the rice and lifted his eye toward Zhang Yuchun. “Authentic three reds are great with steamed rice.”

Of course he recognized the dish. Zhang Yuchun couldn’t help but comment, “The meat is cut too thickly. It’s not how we do it back home.”

The lady working at the cafeteria was from the north and didn’t know how to cook this dish. To prepare this specialty home cooking for Zhang Yuchun, Xie Lanshan had to search for a recipe on his phone in one hand and hold a ladle in the other as he cooked. He had purposely kept the pork uncut and in large chunks to make it seem phony.

Xie Lanshan smiled back. “I’ll let you treat me to an authentic meal after you go back home.”

The home cooking prickled at his homesickness, and the words “go home” reached further into Zhang Yuchun’s heart. “Can I really go back home?”

“I don’t know. It’ll depend on if you cooperate.” Xie Lanshan’s expression hardened. “Regardless of what you think, ‘keep your mouth shut, keep out of jail’ is absolute bullshit.”

“Don’t say bullshit. Officers like us need to have some shred of decorum.” Tao Longyue’s colorful vocabulary was on full display when he’d give prisoners a tongue-lashing himself but he didn’t hesitate to act the part of mature leader in front of Xie Lanshan.

“Then it’s donkey farts and weasel shit on top of rotten bullshit.” Xie Lanshan pulled out the dramatics. “Whoever came up with that line deserves to be shot dead.”

Zhang Yuchun had not expected Tao Longyue, whom he had known for a long while, to believe his words throughout the interrogation, yet he had a strange feeling Xie Lanshan would understand.

He said he was knocked out the moment he walked inside the door. By the time he regained consciousness, he was already by the river. He mentioned he felt as if someone had tossed him into a river and someone else had pulled him up. The night was dark without the glow of the stars, so the surface of the river had also been pitch-black. He hadn’t fully regained consciousness until dawn, and even then, he had walked back to the city in utter confusion.

“Which river?” Tao Longyue pondered slightly. “You mean Fanluo River?”

Once a famous historical site, the Fanluo River was an important waterway between Hanhai City and its neighbor. It had a wide body and an abundant source of water that connected directly to the ocean, yet its rural location didn’t fit the culture of Hanhai City’s urban landscape. As a result, the historical site had long been overlooked and left untouched by the locals. Rumor had it due to recent urban projects, the area was supposed to be redeveloped. A large number of skyscrapers would begin construction in the near future, but for now, the area still looked like a deserted and lifeless

natural dumpster site.

Calculating the distance between the Cong residence and Fanluo River, the investigators could estimate the time Zhang Yuchun was saved after being tossed into the river. Experience made the two officers grow suspicious of the same detail: no one would be wandering around the river by themselves at three or four in the morning. If such a person truly existed, what had they been doing there?

“They tossed you into the river and then fished you back up? What is that? Some sort of joke people play in the middle of the night?” Tao Longyue couldn’t believe a single word of this nonsense.

“That’s all I remember...” Zhang Yuchun had refused to eat for two days already and was beyond exhausted and hungry. He lowered his head in despair. “I didn’t leave the Cong residence on my own. I really didn’t kill anyone.”

“You never left the Cong residence?” Tao Longyue was getting tired of this line that the suspect had been repeating since the moment they stepped inside the interrogation room. He had no reason to believe in Zhang Yuchun. “The surveillance caught you on camera. You better confess your crimes immediately!”

“I never left! I swear!” Zhang Yuchun’s eyes were reddening. “Tao, bro, please believe me. I was knocked out the moment I stepped inside.”

“How do you expect me to believe that? The surveillance and fingerprints are all hard evidence. That’s more than enough for the court to give you a death sentence! Now you’re saying someone saved you from the river, but there’s no proof aside from your words. Even if I believe you, the prosecutor’s office sure won’t!”

After drying out his throat from the scolding, Tao Longyue took a sip of cold tea to calm himself down. Xie Lanshan, who had been listening quietly throughout the exchange, finally spoke up. “I want to trust you, but you have to provide me with more details. Close your eyes and adjust your breathing; think back to the night of the crime and tell me—how did you get knocked out after you stepped inside the Cong residence? Did someone hit you with a dull object from the back or cover your mouth with a cloth...” For someone like Zhang Yuchun, who didn’t trust cops, he would be less inclined to cooperate when under extreme stress and anxiety. Even if he did confess, he’d easily miss important details.

Zhang Yuchun was still in a state of disbelief. He followed Xie Lanshan’s words, then opened his eyes abruptly. “Someone stabbed my neck with a needle. I can show you guys the needle hole.”

“It’s no use.” Xie Lanshan shook his head. “If you really got jabbed, the puncture would have healed while you were hiding from us.”

Zhang Yuchun's gaze darkened once again.

"Don't give up now. Think hard about it. You said someone saved you from the river. Even if you were still half-unconscious and couldn't recall their face, can you remember what they were wearing? What about their body size? Or smell?"

Tao Longyue chimed in, "Unless you can find the person that saved you to be your witness now, you're going to be the culprit of this case, even if you didn't do it."

"They left after saving me. There's no way I could find them." Panicking, Zhang Yuchun blinked his dry eyes in a desperate attempt to recall the event. "I was choking in the water, but I feel like the person was probably an old man because I could see his white hair. Oh, and after he pulled me to shore, he tried to check if I was still breathing or not. I think I remember smelling spicy hot pot from his fingertips."

The moment he walked out of the interrogation room, Tao Longyue cursed out loud. "Such a stubborn little shit who doesn't know how to give up—how dare he even try to play games with me by refusing to eat. I swear I want to drop Tiger Balm oil into his eyes and see what he'll say then!"

What Captain Tao mentioned was an actual interrogation method. While he seemed well versed in more brutal methods, he never truly acted on any of them—even before strict regulations were in place.

"The higher-ups want us to take care of this case as soon as possible. Let's close it soon and send it off to the courts. This kid doesn't know anything and won't even speak clearly." Sighing, Tao Longyue shook his head. "I bet he's the real culprit and lied about being knocked out."

Xie Lanshan frowned slightly. "Regardless, let's inspect Fanluo River first."

Despite the complaints, before stepping out of the violent crime office, Captain Tao ordered Ding Li, "Get some porridge for Zhang Yuchun. He's been hiding for these last few days and hasn't eaten since he was taken in. Make sure he's got some food in his stomach."

Fanluo River, now virtually a site for refuse, showed no signs of the legendary fine weather and elegant scenery characteristic of abundant waters. Several temporary factories had been built around the area in the past, but due to lack of consistent management near the river, these illegal and privately owned factories developed a bad practice of dumping waste near the riverbank. The former natural beauty of the river had fallen and was overtaken by garbage.

Near a thinner branch of the river was an old bridge that had become washed-up over time. Its main body was already filled with mold and the cracks in between the stone foundation were menacingly large and unstable.

Although the factories had moved away over the last two years, the water pollution problem was still severe. The river water near the site of the inspection was thick like mud and filled the air with an awful odor.

The sky was clear during the day. Eyes closed, Xie Lanshan stood by the riverbank, letting the wind blow across his face and sweep away the polluted air. He placed himself in the shoes of the old man—Zhang Yuchun's savior—experiencing the lonely, solitary night by the cold river.

"I have to say it's quite smart to toss corpses here. It's filled with so much trash it'd be hard to leave any evidence," Tao Longyue commented offhandedly, "but who would show up at a place like this at three or four in the morning? They even left after saving someone. I don't understand."

Xie Lanshan opened his eyes. "A culprit."

Tao Longyue was shocked. "What culprit? The one behind the Cong family murder?"

Xie Lanshan didn't respond. *Perhaps "culprit" is too heavy of a word*, he thought. The person who stood here that night must have been someone carrying a big secret and a painful burden, like this calm river connecting the past to the present. While the water seemed tranquil on the surface, tides churned violently and restlessly underneath with no end.

The trip yielded no useful results. After questioning a few locals, they confirmed the area was virtually deserted even during the day, and one would only possibly see a ghost at night. Tao Longyue and Xie Lanshan drove back, returning to the city after an hour-long drive.

Looking up at the red light, Tao Longyue stopped the car by the edge of a crossroad. He turned his head out the window. "How come Uncle Tan hasn't been out lately?"

Xie Lanshan's gaze turned outward following Tao Longyue's question, noticing the familiar figure had been gone for a few days already. He pondered the empty streetside and suddenly asked Tao Longyue once the car accelerated once again, "How's the Hunting Net Operation going?"

"Thankfully, quite a few old cases left similar evidence like the footprint we found at the Cong residence. So now the main task is to narrow in on migrants and other suspicious personnel to verify their footprints." Cold cases were not under the jurisdiction of Captain Tao's violent crime unit. "But those years-old cases are difficult to investigate."

Xie Lanshan pressed his eyebrows down sternly. "You told Uncle Tan all of this?"

"I didn't voluntarily say it; he was asking, and seemed interested. I promise there won't be a next time." Tao Longyue knew he was in the wrong but still tried to find excuses. "Uncle Tan's like half of a policeman in our area. You've seen all the deeds he's done for us over these years; discussing some cases

with him isn't much of an issue."

Without responding, Xie Lanshan furrowed his eyebrows and looked out the window.

Tao Longyue asked, "How come you haven't been driving lately?"

"I have a driver. Why do I need to drive myself?"

"Your driver? You mean Shen Liufei?" Tao Longyue had seen Xie Lanshan get off the back of Shen Liufei's bike the other day. The sparks that flew when the two men glanced at each other and their seamless cooperation clearly went beyond mere friendship. "You're too close to that Shen Liufei." Tao Longyue once again reiterated, "Have you not considered what kind of person would have those kinds of scars?"

Xie Lanshan hadn't. With Shen Liufei, he had always felt comfortable and at peace, which was a strange feeling and phenomenon even he couldn't explain.

"Either way." Seeing Xie Lanshan remained silent, Captain Tao scowled as he concluded, "that guy's not an average person. I don't trust him."

"Sure, sure, who knew you were so naggy when you're behind the wheel?" Xie Lanshan smiled, unfazed. "I'll drive next time."

"Man, if I didn't know you for so long, I would've guessed you were gay for that Shen guy, seeing how you two interact." Tao Longyue let out a small sigh. "Back when you had a crush on Song Qilian, you would only sculpt things for her and never speak a word."

In terms of academics, Xie Lanshan wasn't good at studying, but he had a talent for crafting. At some point, the teachers in his school joked his father was actually a carpenter. The boy didn't like interacting with others and often spent his break time with a small knife and piece of wood, carving little things under a tree. He would make elephants, birds, rabbits, and other animals. Every piece emerging from his adept hands was recognizable and artistic.

Tao Longyue knew that Xie Lanshan had once sculpted Song Qilian.

Tao Longyue said, "Don't get any wrong ideas, but Song Qilian... she divorced her husband two months ago..."

Xie Lanshan didn't have any ideas nor did he even hear that message.

Instead, he suddenly said, "I want to go take a look at Uncle Tan's place."

(iv)

Uncle Tan hadn't left his home yet and was shocked to see Xie Lanshan pay a visit. The wrinkles at the corner of his eyes stretched out as he stared wide-eyed at the visitors.

Xie Lanshan pretended to not notice the tremble of anxiety and grinned. "Uncle Tan!"

A smell flew by his nose, a familiar scent he had never really taken note of in the past. Uncle Tan sold skewers and spicy hot pot during the night, which had been the main source of his income for a large portion of his life. Therefore, even after everything was put away, the fresh aroma of spices and pepper lingered in the room. Perhaps that scent had also merged with the old man long ago and could no longer be washed off.

It was the smell of the spicy hot pot.

The house was completely clean; everything from the closet to the tables was empty as if the old man was ready to embark on a long journey with no plans to return.

The old man had stayed in this apartment for many years and was acquainted with the landlord. The entire cramped and old space fit only one man and couldn't be rented out for a good price. Uncle Tan had never moved, making him a rare gem among tenants who didn't bargain for lower rent, never was late with payments, and uttered not a single complaint about his living space. If he saw anything broken or that needed fixing in his own unit, he would often pay out of his own pocket.

Xie Lanshan's gaze fell to the walls covered in news articles. The clippings detailed natural disasters around the area or places in need of aid. Despite his small earnings, the old man would often make donations, humbly saying the money was just pocket change.

The old man lived like a hardworking ant—a small creature in the vast world who lived strongly despite struggling to make ends meet. His regular meals were porridge with mantou steamed buns. Sometimes, if he felt fancy, he would add a small spoonful of salt. He enjoyed the austere lifestyle and stubbornly refused to burden others.

Xie Lanshan quietly studied the old man's unit, then grinned to say he wanted to help send the old man off.

"It wasn't all my idea, to be honest. My friend that came with me last time said he couldn't forget your cooking and wanted to taste it again."

Tao Longyue nodded. "Yeah, I'll send Uncle Tan off too."

"You don't need to come. Don't you have a date with Doctor Su tonight?"

"I don't... wait, do I?"

"Of course, you idiot." Wrapping his arm around Tao Longyue's shoulder, Xie Lanshan gave him a large grin, one that was almost too friendly. "She told me first, I bet she's going to call you soon."

Completely out of the loop, Tao Longyue didn't understand, yet seeing how Xie Lanshan's eyes were filled with confidence, he instinctively nodded. "Oh, right, she did invite me, we..."

Eyes black as voids, Uncle Tan looked at Xie Lanshan and finally nodded after a long while.

Pausing their investigation briefly, Xie Lanshan and Tao Longyue stopped by the municipal bureau first before going back home to drive their own cars.

Xie Lanshan hadn't driven since he was suspended from his post, but Tao Longyue's words today reminded him of something. When he thought about Shen Liufei, he recalled those hands brushing against his face, the clean and beautiful lines of the artist's every joint, the smooth skin, the alluring scent tickling his heartstrings.

This sudden, fleeting thought took Xie Lanshan by surprise; he thought over it slightly before taking Tao Longyue's advice and heading out to drive his own car to find Shen Liufei.

As he walked into the parking lot, an acquaintance had also arrived to pick up a car. The other man saw Xie Lanshan come in. "Your car's been parked for two months here. I bet it's filled with dust."

Xie Lanshan's car was a large, military-green SUV: the Chinese-made giant was strong and square even from its appearance. He had always preferred larger off-road vehicles but never had the money to buy an expensive Hummer.

Xie Lanshan opened the trunk and stared into the space in the back of his car for a while before furrowing his brows, then relaxed them.

He drove to pick up Shen Liufei, going straight to the residence the moment he arrived at the building.

Xie Lanshan had been inside Shen Liufei's bedroom before, but due to the shock of finding his own portrait last time, he never had the chance to carefully study it. The man was certainly an artist with taste; his preference in interior decor leaned toward Chinese style, but it was more minimal and freer than traditional design. The colors were also uniform and avoided flowery designs. Some places were specially designed to be Zen-like, thus making the room more spacious.

The bed was also quite large. Xie Lanshan leaned on it.

All the while, Shen Liufei was drawing by the window.

Xie Lanshan's gaze fixed on Shen Liufei. Behind the man in this open space was the view of twilight. Almond-yellow blended into coral red, down to an elegant violet, creating a mixed palette of floral colors. The sunlight outlining these hues through the window cast onto the floor, slowly creeping up to the bedside as the sun fell.

The atmosphere was perfect.

"You still haven't started work?" Xie Lanshan suddenly asked.

"No, but soon."

"Why can't you just start early?"

"It's not time yet." Shen Liufei spoke with strict, unshakable principles. "Wait until my classes are over."

“Then can you draw a portrait first?” Xie Lanshan attempted to bargain.

“Of you?” Shen Liufei lifted his eyes from the canvas, showing a hint of interest. “I can consider it.”

“Aren’t you already working on one?”

“It’s not enough.” Shen Liufei’s eyes peeked out from the canvas. “You said it yourself—this isn’t your most beautiful look.”

The moment their eyes met, Xie Lanshan didn’t hesitate to take off his clothes. He swiftly unbuttoned his shirt and exposed his beautiful, cream-colored abs.

He was ready to remove his pants, but Shen Liufei only watched soundlessly and Xie Lanshan suddenly stopped his hands.

“What’s wrong?” Shen Liufei asked lightly. “Are you scared?”

Xie Lanshan laughed. He lay on the bed, turned his body, and then lifted his head. An arm resting on Shen Liufei’s pillow, he fixed his gaze on the artist.

“I’m a gift.” A finger hooked onto the waist of the pants to pull them down, exposing his clean Apollo’s belt. Narrowing his eyes lazily, Xie Lanshan curled up the edge of his lips in an almost seductive manner. “I think this fine packaging deserves to be unwrapped by the recipient, don’t you?”

Xie Lanshan’s eyes were clear and provocative, his face handsome and fair. He was confident there was no reason for anyone to refuse him.

Shen Liufei decided to take up the offer. He stood up from his chair, slowly making his way toward the man on the bed. The light was against him; the shadow over his unfazed and calm expression made judging any sort of emotion deep within him virtually impossible.

Shen Liufei lifted Xie Lanshan’s chin. During the exchange of their glances, Xie Lanshan pushed himself toward the artist.

The two men dissolved into a brawl, fighting to push the other down. Xie Lanshan won the upper hand. After a brief confrontation, he pressed Shen Liufei down beneath him.

During the struggle, Shen Liufei’s shirt opened completely, exposing his chest to the other man. He gazed at Xie Lanshan with his usual tranquil eyes and showed no sign of fighting back.

Tao Longyue’s words earlier in the day piqued his curiosity; Xie Lanshan touched the left side of Shen Liufei’s chest with a gentle gesture, tracing the flowery pattern as if he was treating an injury. The tattoo adroitly hid a long scar of nearly ten centimeters—one that used to be gruesome.

Xie Lanshan’s body temperature was lower than the average person, so he warmed when he shared physical contact with anyone. To his surprise, Shen Liufei’s temperature was even lower than his own, feeling as cold as the snowy white skin looked. The tips of his fingers felt like coal pressing into ice, like he was burning up that pale skin. The man instinctively contracted his

muscles.

Xie Lanshan brushed his finger across Shen Liufei's scar, smiling. "I never asked you before—how did you get these scars?"

"Car accidents and fistfights." Those words held no emotions.

Xie Lanshan couldn't help but think, *No wonder*, almost blurting out that the man deserved it. This man rode his bike too aggressively.

"These scars patched up nicely, but they all spread out in different directions. The angle and depth also vary visibly. I can assume no less than five people have tried to cut you. Also, the blades were no shorter than forty centimeters in length."

He slid his fingers to the side, toward those fine muscles, then finally landed back at the ribs and another menacing scar. "This one was about ten centimeters deep, slicing through the fascia, harming the muscles..."

Xie Lanshan's words were firm. Every analysis was precise and correct. His long index finger ran toward the front of the man's chest; he chuckled lightly. "This must be a scar left from surgery. Sixteen centimeters on the left side, patching up a broken lung..."

Throughout, Shen Liufei's expression remained unchanged, as if all these past injuries meant nothing to him, and he wasn't fearful of being confronted about them.

"And this..." Xie Lanshan's hands finally rested near a scar on Shen Liufei's neck. Like brushing the trunk of a large tree, his fingers traced from his neck, collarbone, and then down to his chest, connecting all of these scars.

At the same time, Shen Liufei kneed the man's lower abdomen. The two fought another brief tussle on the bed until the tides turned—Shen Liufei took control of the situation.

Glaring at each other, the two men panted heavily, and in hostility. Shen Liufei's white skin grew pinkish; Xie Lanshan's touch gave the horrible and ugly scars on his body new life, like fresh flowers blooming after a snow season in the south.

Shen Liufei pressed Xie Lanshan down beneath him. "So what exactly are you here for?"

"After the surveillance footage was restored, we all assumed the culprit killed Cong Ying's family after midnight; but that was actually a curveball the culprit threw at the investigators to mislead us. Let's assume the real culprit had already been hiding inside the Cong family house before Zhang Yuchun arrived..." Retracting his joking demeanor, Xie Lanshan spoke firmly with a confident look in his eyes. "I have a theory."

"What a coincidence. I do too. But I also heard the city is keeping a close eye on this homicide case; your branch chief wishes to close this case as soon as possible."

Xie Lanshan was quite displeased. “That guy again.”

Shen Liufei nodded. “So he won’t support this baseless theory of yours. Zhang Yuchun’s confession is completely powerless before all of the hard evidence. He is still the prime suspect.”

Xie Lanshan agreed. “If a witness could prove he was tossed into the river that night, he would have a much better chance of turning the tables in his favor.”

“You discovered proof of his story?” Shen Liufei finally let go of Xie Lanshan and put his clothes back on. His expression was unfathomable, as if he already knew the answer.

“Logically, I feel like I’ve found the witness for Zhang Yuchun, but... emotionally, I still don’t want to believe it.” Xie Lanshan also got up to put his clothes back on. He took out his phone to check the time, then shot another smile at Shen Liufei. “I do want to ask you for a portrait, but before that, I’d like you to cooperate with me in a small act.”

Xie Lanshan arrived with his car around dinnertime and offered to give Shen Liufei a ride. The car was the deep military-green off-road vehicle, harshly rectangular on the outside like its bold owner. While it drove just fine, the rumbling engine gave away its old age as it trudged down the road. Xie Lanshan had been considering getting a new car, but his favorite Hummers were too expensive.

Shen Liufei turned to see Xie Lanshan in the massive vehicle and lifted the corner of his lips. He said, teasingly, “An antique left by your grandpa?”

“Bro, I’m an underpaid and overworked civil servant. What do you expect me to drive?” Xie Lanshan brushed off Shen Liufei’s judgy comment and chuckled. “This car is the one love of my life, so if you keep making fun of it I’ll have to ask you to sit in the trunk...”

An epiphany struck. The two men’s eyes widened as they turned to face each other. Their expressions shifted from frowns to surprise within moments.

The culprit had hidden in the trunk of Li Rui’s car to escape the surveillance.

(v)

The send-off gathering was at Uncle Tan’s place. Even after being cleaned out, his unit was too small to fit everyone. Uncle Tan pulled some stools and a table under a large locust tree to greet the guests.

He had prepared a full table of food: spicy popcorn chicken with fresh beef; chili stir-fried vegetables; and more grilled peppers. Uncle Tan gave an apologetic smile to the two guests. “I’m a Sichuan-born old bone. I enjoy that

spiciness with my food."

Thankfully, Xie Lanshan wasn't a picky eater, and Shen Liufei wasn't afraid of spice. They sat down facing each other with Uncle Tan between the two.

In the cloudy summer night, the moon dashed through the clouds, peeking out only every once in a while to gleam through the leaves and branches of the tree. Broken moonlight scattered over the table, glinting across the faces of the three men sitting at the table.

"Sichuan dishes with red wine? What kind of new-style cuisine is this?" Despite the complaint, Xie Lanshan didn't hesitate to pour himself a drink. After a taste of Shen Liufei's prized wine, he could no longer drink cheap alcohol.

The wine was from Shen Liufei, Latour as usual. He said that Lafite reds were bold and savory while Latour reds were richer and fuller; he preferred the latter a bit more. Xie Lanshan concurred. Uncle Tan downed his entire drink. He only realized what he had done after seeing the empty glass. "Oh goodness, I shouldn't have drunk so much, should I?"

"Alcohol is meant to be drunk. It would be pointless if you pretended to appreciate it without even taking a sip." Smiling lightly, Shen Liufei also downed his glass of wine.

The young man looked refined and classy but was quite an approachable individual. Uncle Tan couldn't follow up with anything clever and only laughed in response. Luxury reds and cheap soju were really no different to him. For the old man, alcohol wasn't meant to be enjoyed and was instead a way to wash away his sorrows. The best alcohol could make him forget everything, the kind that let his head spin upon closing his eyes and forget all of his struggles so he could let go of the past.

As the wind passed, the leaves on the tree above their heads rustled and fell off the branches. A small grayish bug suddenly dropped along with the leaves, falling right into an empty bowl on the table.

"Slap it dead." Pretending to be angry, Xie Lanshan swiftly turned the entire bowl over, trapping the bug inside.

"No, no." Uncle Tan objected out of kindness. "This is a cicada."

Xie Lanshan and Shen Liufei exchanged glances. The former purposely asked in surprise, "This little thing is a cicada? It's not even daytime anymore."

"It broke out of its shell early to bring good fortune to people." Uncle Tan carefully picked up the cicada under the bowl, then let it fly off the palm of his hand.

Shen Liufei silently studied the man. This tan and small old man had just set a little bug free.

His gaze also fixed on Uncle Tan, Xie Lanshan grinned. “Uncle Tan, you really are a good person.”

“No, no, I’m not... I’m not a good person...” The old man waved his hand and shook his head humbly as if he couldn’t accept compliments. “I’m merely an average person, just like you see everywhere...”

“No, you’re not average.” Xie Lanshan poured more wine into the old man’s glass. “People in our profession, we’re constantly dealing with the dark side of society. Siblings fighting over their inheritance, husbands killing their wives for their lover... it’s easy for us to give up hope on humanity. But thanks to you, Uncle Tan, I was able to believe there are kind souls in this world.”

Xie Lanshan raised his wineglass. “Cheers to you.”

“I really... don’t deserve this...” Face reddened, the old man desperately tried to refute the compliment, yet found himself defeated. The man once again picked up his wineglass to down the alcohol, then choked as he drank too fast.

“Like the mass murder case a few days ago.” Xie Lanshan placed his wineglass down and brought the conversation back on topic. “We’ve already caught the culprit, but he refused to admit it was his doing and kept insisting he was being set up. He insisted he was knocked out by someone around 2 or 3 A.M. on the twelfth and tossed into Fanluo River. But all of the evidence right now points to him. It’s no use to make excuses anymore. By the time the case moves to the prosecutor’s office and finally into court, his death sentence will be inevitable.”

He emphasized the time, knowing an exact time could help people recall specific memories.

As expected, Uncle Tan’s hand visibly trembled. He stuttered slightly. “Y-you can’t do that, though, right? Since there are still unanswered questions about the case, they can’t just send a verdict down, right?”

“Why not? Do you think cases like these are uncommon?” Xie Lanshan shifted his gaze toward Shen Liufei. “You can ask Mr. Shen here.”

“It’s certainly not as uncommon as you’d imagine,” Shen Liufei said lightly. “People often say justice is only delayed and not absent, but delayed justice has no meaning to the wrongly accused. The dead cannot be brought back, and the ones who managed to survive will waste most of their lives in prison.”

“Our branch chief is busy trying to close the case; he wants to take credit while it’s hot. That desperation sure is fucking impressive.” Sighing, Xie Lanshan turned his head toward the old man. “Uncle Tan, do you think we should save him?”

“Save... save who?” Uncle Tan was shocked.

“Save that suspect who claimed he was tossed into the Fanluo River. Oh, right, his name is Zhang Yuchun.” Xie Lanshan looked right into Uncle Tan’s eyes. “Zhang Yuchun said he was saved by someone from the river. If we can find the person who saved him, perhaps he would be able to get out of his current situation.”

Xie Lanshan pulled out his cell phone from his pocket, almost as if he was ready to show Shen Liufei a video, but instead he placed the phone in front of Uncle Tan.

The video was of a young man crying before the interrogator, “I really didn’t kill anyone. I know I’ve done wrong in the past, but I’m changed now. I want to become a good person... I’m a good person...”

The words “good person” were like coal burning on the old man’s heart. He drank another glass. He had never had such expensive wine before but couldn’t even savor the taste. Instead, an intense bitterness filled his mouth and throat that he found difficult to swallow.

The young man being interrogated in the video was wailing hopelessly, snot and tears mingling on his face. The interrogating policeman loudly berated him, “Be honest!” He clearly didn’t believe the suspect.

Pitiful. The cries were pitiful. The person’s appearance in the video was even more pitiful.

The old man felt burdened.

Xie Lanshan took his phone back and turned off the video. “There was a storm that night with heavy winds. Whoever jumped into those muddy waters during the middle of the night to save someone must have an immensely kind heart. If they knew someone was to lose their life due to their silence, I’m sure they wouldn’t be able to find peace.” Xie Lanshan once again shot a glance at Shen Liufei. “Isn’t that right, Mr. Shen?”

“Yes.” Shen Liufei nodded. “Perhaps living another day with this knowledge would be a weight on their shoulders.”

Uncle Tan’s face grew horrifyingly pale. He was shaken up. “Will he... will he really die?”

“I just said it—if someone could be his witness, he wouldn’t die.” Xie Lanshan only managed to keep his serious expression for three seconds before he sighed again. “But how can we even find that person without any leads? Besides, who knows if this Zhang kid was just making things up to get out of punishment? He has a record and was a drug addict; it wouldn’t be surprising for him to murder a whole family.”

Uncle Tan’s eyes grew emptier and more soulless. He no longer followed the conversation.

“All right, all right, we’re here to send Uncle Tan off today and not talk about these upsetting things. Let’s have another toast.” Xie Lanshan looked up

at the sky. His expression looked a bit dramatic, as if he was thinking up a reason for the toast. “Cheers to the untainted and pure heart.”

During this going-away feast, no one ate much and the alcohol failed to wash away the negativity in the air.

Xie Lanshan had driven himself and the guest over, but neither of the men were in the position to drive back. They decided to take a small walk while the moon glistened above them.

As the half-moon stood out among the scarce stars in the sky, the two men passed by an old residential area. Xie Lanshan whistled lightly with a hint of tipsiness.

Shen Liufei asked, “Your public security here allows you to show interrogation videos to outsiders?”

“Of course not.” Xie Lanshan turned his head toward Shen Liufei and leaned his head in by the latter’s ear. “This was a clip I found from a cop show drama.”

Seeing some suspicion, Xie Lanshan added, “It was pitch-black at night by the riverbank. I’m sure Uncle Tan never got a good look at Zhang Yuchun’s face.”

Shen Liufei faintly smiled. This young cop’s clear eyes glistened like stars, almost like a naughty child’s rather than a dependable adult’s. “Do you think this is going to work?”

Xie Lanshan returned with a question. “You’ve been suspecting Uncle Tan before me. Why do you ask?”

“To put it simply, human nature is evil, and I don’t really believe there is truly pure goodness in this world.” Xie Lanshan’s gaze was still locked on him; perhaps this answer wasn’t satisfactory, so Shen Liufei continued, “To be more precise, some subconscious expressions and gestures gave him away. Uncle Tan was very invested in the Hunting Net Operation, more so than any average person. Of course, I’m not a fortune-teller and I didn’t know to connect it with this homicide case, but my instincts told me he is a man with a dark past.”

“Well, what about you?” Xie Lanshan suddenly pressed his face near Shen Liufei. At the crosswalk waiting for the lights to change, they could smell each other’s breath, which warmed up the scent of the wine and turned into an alluring aroma between the two, almost like the lingering smell of cologne.

“Do you have a dark past?”

“Everyone has darkness in their heart.” Shen Liufei moved his gaze downward to Xie Lanshan’s neck. He casually touched the bullet necklace; the tip of his finger brushed against Xie Lanshan’s skin.

His fingers were icy and long; dangerous yet mysterious, the gesture felt almost like a blade ready to slice through a man’s throat. Xie Lanshan’s head

spun, and he began to think the wine from earlier was finally catching up to him. He took the necklace back from Shen Liufei's hands right away, then made a joke to change the strange atmosphere.

"I don't know if it'll work or not. I'm not confident." Xie Lanshan let out a small sigh after a long while. "I'll believe in it one more time."

I'll believe in humanity one more time.

(vi)

Homicide and violent crime unit Captain Tao was not having a good day. Pressure from all around the city weighed on the shoulders of the municipal bureau. Cong Ying's uncle sent a complaint to the bureau, suspecting the investigation team was purposely dragging the case out in favor of the culprit. He argued the suspect was already arrested with undeniable evidence, so why were the police not sending him to the guillotine yet? Next, a journalist dug up the captain's personal relation with Zhang Yuchun, reporting the captain was biased toward the suspect for his own benefit. The report went so far as to blame him for protecting a former drug addict by giving him a delivery job, indirectly causing the tragic mass homicide case. That news report spread like wildfire; even Xie Lanshan had seen it.

His superiors asked Tao Longyue to communicate with Cong Ying's uncle to ease the sorrows of the victim's family. Li Rui had made a better impression on this uncle he had never met before than anyone had anticipated; the two quickly joined hands on the case and the former homicide suspect now returned to the bureau as an acquaintance of the victim's family.

Tao Longyue could no longer take the man away in front of the building managers and needed to pay a visit to the former suspect out of courtesy.

Xie Lanshan requested to follow Tao Longyue. Due to new evidence from the restored surveillance footage and a proper alibi, Li Rui had already been removed from the suspect list, but Xie Lanshan still retained his suspicion of the man.

Before leaving the municipal bureau, Tao Longyue asked, "Did you drive?"

Xie Lanshan was tired of listening to his buddy talk and walked out of the door. "Yeah, I'll take you today."

Grinning giddily, Tao Longyue thought Xie Lanshan had listened to his advice. "I knew it wouldn't be easy for you to bend your ass over and become gay overnight."

Xie Lanshan was tired of responding to Tao Longyue. Who would have known that this hooligan of a straight man would be the one to fill his mind with dirty homosexual thoughts all day?

“The higher-ups want us to close the case.” In the passenger’s seat, Captain Tao rubbed his scar and let out a long sigh.

“Higher-ups?” Xie Lanshan’s eyes were fixed on the road. “You mean Chief Liu, right?”

After receiving a confirmation, Xie Lanshan pinched the bullet around his neck wordlessly.

Chief Liu referred to Liu Yanbo, the current branch chief of the Hanhai Municipal Bureau. A generation ago, Liu Yanbo, Tao Jun, and Xie Jiaqing made up the famous antidrug force iron triangle of the bureau. Even the national public security department recognized their work and contribution. In Xie Lanshan’s childhood home, a banner with the words “For the people, an honored hero” had hung proudly on display. His father didn’t live by these words, but he always kept himself disciplined and even motivated his own son with them.

In the past, the three stars of the antidrug force were given the nickname the “Flaming Triangle” to contrast with the Golden Triangle, a reference to the ancient Taoist philosophy. Among the five basic elements, metal was weak to fire, so these special forces were the most fearsome enemy to the drug lords of the black market. Now, the former Flaming Triangle had disbanded. One died, another was disabled, and the last one had become so engrossed in ranks and politics he no longer remembered his youthful aspiration of serving the people.

From an objective perspective, Xie Jiaqing and Liu Yanbo were comrades who had braved life and death together, the way brothers would have each other’s backs. Even if it wasn’t in a will, Liu Yanbo naturally should have cared for the son left behind after his friend’s death. Yet not only did Liu Yanbo show no kindness to Xie Lanshan, he was also extremely strict and harsh. It was one thing to refuse to promote the young cop, but during the gunshot incident, Liu Yanbo had insisted on expelling the young man even though the prosecutor’s office hadn’t mentioned the possibility.

Xie Lanshan had never thought much about it, but after this incident, he often recalled those words Mu Kun had said to him years ago: his old man had been shot from behind.

“Also, about that uncle of Cong Ying’s, his neighbor said he was rarely seen walking around until now. Recently, he’s been visiting the police station every day requesting to punish Zhang Yuchun; I’ve told him we have procedures for dealing with criminals, but he kept saying I was unlawfully defending the suspect,” Captain Tao complained.

“You can’t really blame the chief and the victim’s family,” Xie Lanshan said. “There’s too little evidence. Aside from Zhang Yuchun himself, nobody could prove the legitimacy of his confessions. If we can rely on anyone’s word

to handle cases, people could claim aliens came and murdered their family, let alone an imaginary culprit they created in their own heads."

"By the way, we've looked into Li Rui's father and his car crash."

"What's up?"

"The screw on the oil pipe near the left side of the front wheel went loose, causing the brakes to malfunction. He ran right into a truck and died before he got to the hospital."

Xie Lanshan frowned. "These screws usually have lock protection. It wouldn't loosen up on its own."

"Right, someone manipulated the brakes. The insurance company used the excuse that suicides are not part of the insured events of their policy and refused to pay up." Tao Longyue sighed and continued, "Li Rui's mother ended up getting very sick after that too. This guy's childhood was rough."

Xie Lanshan questioned, "Why didn't they examine the case from the perspective of a potential homicide?"

"Homicide? To kill who? Li Xiangqian? He was millions of yuans in debt, which was an astronomical sum back in the day. The debt collectors were knocking on his door; he could have easily lost a limb. Why would they go to such lengths to make the murder so subtle, and how did they expect his wife and child to repay the debt? Besides, Li Xiangqian's crash happened right after he made a huge purchase. The timing isn't right. Soon after the accident, a number of Li Xiangqian's friends, including Cong Zhiming, became prime suspects. Cong Zhiming confessed Li Xiangqian had asked to borrow money from him, but he refused. After that, Li Xiangqian's psychological state was very unstable, and he was caught in the accident a short time after he returned home. Either way, the authorities ruled it as a suicide and closed the case. Even though the victim's family nearly wept themselves to death, they accepted it in the end."

Xie Lanshan's eyebrows remained pressed together. The car sped up an instant right before the light turned red. Tao Longyue's description of "weeping themselves to death" felt too casual.

When his old man had died, he also thought his mom could accept her husband's death. The sorrow and trauma others spoke of were all too real for the mother and son duo, whose wounds were carved deep into their hearts from their experience. Xie Lanshan had held himself up and didn't cry, and though his mother attempted to put on a front, she finally reached her breaking point and went mad. To be more exact, she developed schizophrenia. The doctor had kindly explained to him the illness developed due to intense trauma of the mind and could be treated with proper procedures.

Xie Lanshan worked with the doctor to actively treat his mother for many years, yet not only did it not yield results, but his mother's condition

worsened. Now, his mother couldn't even recognize her own son and would scream upon seeing him.

Xie Lanshan drove toward the creative business zone. The security guard at the gate still remembered the face from the driver's seat, but the cloudy look in the officer's eyes frightened him, so he didn't dare to stop him.

Cong Ying's uncle was also in the headquarters of Qiong Li Design. Tao Longyue walked into Li Rui's office while Xie Lanshan stayed outside in the employee area.

Like every other boring office building, this design firm had an overwhelmingly large percentage of female workers. Xie Lanshan was soon buried in a crowd of young women, and had become the main center of attention among these little flowers. Xie Lanshan stood between the two girls he briefly encountered last time.

"Boss Li always encouraged us to read and buy reference books related to design and art; he even gives us bonuses every month to buy books. He said designers need to recharge and enhance their creativity, and if we find anything particularly good, we should also get him a copy."

Virtually all the women in the office area had their eyes on him; even after becoming used to cops walking in and out of their office the last few days, finding such a handsome lad among a sea of uniforms was rare. Only Tracy still held her elegant head up high without even sparing a look at the man.

"Is that the boss's secretary?" Xie Lanshan's eyes followed Tracy's figure as she walked away. She was slender and tall, much like Cong Ying had been.

"She's not just a secretary for work. She's also his private secretary off-hours too." A thinner and small young woman said, "Tracy's Chinese name is Lin Ruixi. She was a theater student before coming here. She's only ever played some small roles in the past but has the pride of a main female lead and always orders the bosses and others around the office."

Cong Ying's uncle gave Tao Longyue another huge scolding, which the captain couldn't even defend himself from; he quickly left Li Rui's office in anger.

Less than a minute after he returned to the municipal bureau with Xie Lanshan, Ding Li rushed over in a hurry.

"Zh-Zhang Yuchun's witness is here!" she called out before she could even catch her breath. "He's here to turn himself in!"

(vii)

Tan Guangsheng didn't expect saving someone from a muddy river in the middle of the night would rope him into a mass murder case in the city, but the real story had started thirty years ago. Reminiscing, he couldn't help but be

awed at heaven's method of sending a messenger of justice before him now. In the past, he hadn't been a white-haired, hunchbacked Uncle Tan. People had once called him Brother Sheng because the large man upheld justice like a dependable older brother.

Tan Guangsheng took pride in being called Brother Sheng and loved helping others out; sometimes it was a small favor, but other times, he had taken on trouble—and dangerous tasks. His wife always had issues with his proclivities and called him a fool for being too kind, but he waved it off with a smile, claiming there was more joy in giving than receiving. He believed they would one day come upon great fortune.

However, Tan Guangsheng never did. Instead, his comrades from work came in tears to ask him for help. They cried about how the factory owner, Boss Tan, had purposely delayed their wages until it had built up and they were owed one hundred thousand yuan. They wanted to bring this up to their boss, but no one dared to speak up.

Tan Guangsheng was a temporary worker at the factory who had only helped for two days. He also had never received his promised compensation, but it wasn't enough for him to make a huge deal out of it. Now rumor had it Boss Tan often spent over a hundred thousand yuan in one night at clubs but refused to pay up the same amount to his workers. Upon hearing this, his blood had boiled in anger, and he stood up and said, "Yes, these are my brothers—I'll make sure he pays!"

Tan Guangsheng brought his worker friends over to have a talk with Boss Tan. He'd never received a proper education, but he was a smooth talker. He rallied the other workers to strike against their boss and pressure the managing team to pay.

At some point, the situation grew out of control. Seeing Tan Guangsheng was at the center of the mass strike, the managers of the factory quickly thought of an underhanded plan. Boss Tan spread a rumor: the salaries were not paid because of a private conflict between the boss and Tan Guangsheng.

Tan Guangsheng would always remember that day. He had gathered the same group of workers to surround Boss Tan's office and block the entrance. They had organized themselves to stand by, chanting in unison for payment. To their surprise, Boss Tan had built many personal connections in different fields and had a handful of dangerous friends. A group of people suddenly burst out of the door from inside the building and violently chased the workers away.

Tan Guangsheng could fight. Even though he was shorter than others his age, he had trained in kung fu when he was young and was often teased about his resemblance to Bruce Lee. Unfortunately, the opposing side outnumbered him. He battled bravely against the incoming attackers but was still captured.

Three hulks grabbed his shoulders to force him to kneel, but he refused to give in.

Then, Boss Tan pretended to be kind, telling his workers the situation really wasn't what they thought. He claimed he simply couldn't fathom Tan Guangsheng's actions and demanded the man to kneel before him—then he would happily clear the tab.

Given a spark, the rumors quickly exploded among the workers; they were all desperate to go back home for the New Year and begged their Brother Sheng to kneel.

Yet Tan Guangsheng was like a vicious lion, yelling at anyone who approached. He might not be cultured, but he had pride as a man; how could he throw it all away and kneel?

Then a worker mustered up the courage and broke Tan Guangsheng's arm. One after another, more workers joined in, throwing kicks and punches at him. Even the initial man who had tearfully begged for his help gave him a merciless slap across the face.

Tan Guangsheng couldn't remember if he kneeled or not; he simply held his head up in despair at the blue sky until all of the punches and kicks knocked him unconscious.

After getting beaten up by his own comrades, he spent two months in the hospital. None of his "friends" came to pay him a visit during his stay, and his wife was so fed up by his passion that she ran away with someone else.

Boss Tan had a solid network in the area, and sent Tan Guangsheng a threat to leave even before the man could be released from the hospital. He claimed they wouldn't hesitate to break his bones again, so left without a choice, Tan Guangsheng could only drag his injured body out of his hometown.

He later realized his legs were no longer even. Even though it didn't affect his walking, it left a permanent scar on his heart. The more he thought about it, the more he couldn't understand how it had happened. He'd simply lent a helping hand but ended up hurting himself both physically and mentally. And though the physical injuries could heal, he'd lost his trust in others.

After losing hope in humanity, Tan Guangsheng resorted to crime in order to survive. One night after sneaking into someone's house to steal money, the guard dog at the front door chased him down a whole street. It bit a chunk of flesh from his leg, from which the blood gushed out. He trudged forward in pain and more pitiful and wretched than he could endure.

He didn't know how long he walked, but Tan Guangsheng finally knocked on the door of a random household. He was exhausted and had no money; the only thing he wanted was a sip of water.

A woman, a bit wary of a strange man knocking upon her door, answered, but upon seeing the blood on Tan Guangsheng's leg and broken shoe, her heart

wavered. She opened the door. “Sir, would ya like to come in?”

Tan Guangsheng’s heart jumped as he recognized the familiar accent from his hometown in this foreign land.

“Sir, here’s some tea.”

He accepted a large cup of hot barley tea, and suddenly, warmth flowed into his veins. Like a withered tree that had been lifeless for too long, he finally felt some vitality within him.

The woman had married into her current family and hadn’t returned home in many years, so she was also quite pleasantly surprised by his familiar accent. She didn’t show any discomfort toward Tan Guangsheng. “My husband’s out fer a business trip. It’s just me ’n my daughter in the house.”

The woman was cooking. After she asked about the changes in her hometown, she walked back into the kitchen, which was only separated from the living room by a light green cloth curtain decorated with small flowers.

Behind the curtain came a hint of a woman’s voice. Tan Guangsheng listened in.

“I’m certain he must be some sort of criminal from his looks. I’ll report him first and then find a way to keep him until...”

Something inside Tan Guangsheng’s head snapped. His limbs went cold, his body shook, and every drop of blood that had warmed up within him earlier froze into ice. At that moment, Tan Guangsheng recalled that obnoxious Boss Tan, his wife who constantly insulted him for being useless, and the worker friend slapping his face. Humans were shameless and fake. With hesitation, he picked up a knife from the fruit plate sitting out in the kitchen.

The moment the woman lifted the cloth, Tan Guangsheng rushed forward and stabbed her again and again. All of the anger and hatred inside him surfaced until his mind was focused on one thought: releasing it.

The daughter, who had been doing homework upstairs, came down as she heard the commotion. Seeing her mother lying in a pool of blood, she cried out in horror.

Completely mad, Tan Guangsheng quickly rushed up to cover the girl’s mouth, and also stabbed her multiple times.

Who would have known that the tragic tale of Cao Cao murdering Lu Boshe’s family over a misunderstanding would once again repeat itself a thousand years later? The green curtain was drenched in blood. After killing the mother and daughter, Tan Guangsheng entered the kitchen with the knife. He wanted to see if this woman was calling her husband or some other neighbor, only to discover a shocking truth.

“It was dark and silent inside the house. The woman made her decision and carefully walked over toward the man with the horrifying face...”

It was a man's voice—coming from a radio.

Tan Guangsheng froze like a statue.

The pork inside the pot was still steaming, and beside the stove was a small radio. All of the words he had heard earlier were from the program "The Hundred Story Collection."

He hadn't known that the woman had a habit of listening to the radio while she cooked. In fact, he'd been so sensitive, he hadn't even realized the woman's voice on the radio was speaking in standard Chinese, not with the accent from his hometown.

Dumbfounded, Tan Guangsheng walked out of the kitchen. A few broken bowls and utensils lay beside the dead body of the woman. He counted the pieces—three bowls and chopsticks.

His eyes filled with tears.

The kind woman had planned on treating him to a fresh meal.

Yet he killed this kindness with his own two hands.

Tan Guangsheng wiped his fingerprints, took some of the woman's money and jewelry, and placed it all inside an old silver box. He had left too quickly, and after the fact, he discovered from a newspaper that he had left bloody footprints at the scene.

Normally, after spending all of his money and selling the jewelry, he should have quickly gotten rid of the box, but Tan Guangsheng kept it to remind himself he had to repay his sins for the rest of his life.

Due to his uneven legs, Tan Guangsheng was well aware his footprints had a very unique pattern. He heard rumors about the Hunting Net Operation and pried information from Tao Longyue. He knew footprints were also an important part of an investigation; grind marks, external impressions, insole impressions, pressure marks, and other identifying aspects could sometimes be more accurate than a DNA check. Investigators in the past hadn't relied much on them, but nowadays, the situation was different.

He had even seen police officers pouring ink-like liquid on the ground around rental units to document migrants and nonpermanent residents. The technologies made collecting any footprint on the ground easy.

Every word and action made him paranoid. He ran for most of his life, and now, even before the law, his first reaction was still to run.

However, inside the interrogation room, Tan Guangsheng didn't run. He recognized members of the homicide and violent crime unit. The two young cops still called him Uncle Tan out of courtesy.

Instead, he confessed his crimes. He couldn't help but be awed: after hiding and running for his whole life, heaven was truly a messenger of justice.

"I know with your technology nowadays, discovering the truth behind the bloody footprints would only be a matter of time for you all. I wanted to run,

but I didn't want you to be suspicious, so I lied and said my daughter wanted to bring me home...” Of course, the daughter was fake. He gave virtually all of his income to charities, and he spent his days eating mantous and salt. No woman would want him.

During the interrogation period with the suspect, Tao Longyue fell into a rare silence. The old man's confession was beyond his wildest imagination.

Xie Lanshan asked, “So why were you by the Fanluo River during the night of the mass murder case?”

Fanluo River was a waste ground, so a criminal on the run like Tan Guangsheng would likely want to get rid of all evidence from the case. “I wanted to toss the jewelry box, and I figured that was the only place nobody would ever find it.”

Xie Lanshan asked, “What else did you see after that?”

Tan Guangsheng confessed he had seen a red Audi drive by the river that night. He couldn't have been mistaken because he recognized the signature logo. In one swift motion, someone tossed something into the river, which he immediately recognized as a person. Yet the driver had already gotten back into their car and left.

Tao Longyue asked, “Do you remember the license plate number?”

Tan Guangsheng shook his head. “It was too dark in the night, and I was too focused on saving the person. I didn't pay attention to anything else.”

Tao Longyue asked despite already knowing the answer, “Why didn't you call the cops at that time?”

“I couldn't explain what I was doing all by myself at the river in the middle of the night. I was afraid you'd take me in as a suspect and ask for my footprints.”

Tao Longyue continued, “Then why did you decide to come now?”

Tan Guangsheng gave Xie Lanshan a quick glance. “I can't really explain. I thought about it for two days and decided it was still a human life. The person could have also drowned by the time I jumped into the river that night, but I jumped in, so I also decided to confess.” Giving Xie Lanshan another look, the old man shook his head bitterly. “If you let me think about it for two more days, maybe I wouldn't have.”

Xie Lanshan was also shocked. He had a hunch Uncle Tan had some difficult past or secret, but he never would have expected the truth. His expression grew grave. “Do you know the consequences of your confession?”

“I do.” Tan Guangsheng nodded. “I just have to eat a bullet, I know.”

This belated resolution from a thirty-year-old case didn't come with fear but instead was a relief. No matter how many good deeds he performed, he would see the horrifying face of that woman and her daughter after waking up from nightmares in the middle of the night. He'd said he never had much

schooling but he remembered a story from his childhood called “The Farmer and Snake.” He hated the story and was angry with the farmer but had never expected himself to become that shameless and evil snake.

“I kept the secret fer years, but I’ll always remember when that woman called me ‘sir.’ I’ll always remember she took a rotten soul like me, who even a dog hated, into her home. She wanted ta feed me a decent meal...” Tang Guangsheng spoke in his hometown accent. Scared of exposing himself in the past, he had forced himself to speak Mandarin to everyone.

His gaze, filled with boundless regret and hope, pierced through the cold cement walls of the interrogation room as if he was looking right at his hometown, the one he could no longer return to.

He finally said, “I’m not a good person. If I have a next life... I wish to become one.”

Tan Guangsheng and Zhang Yuchun were not associated in any way, and the old man’s confession left Chief Liu completely speechless. Zhang Yuchun finally saw a ray of hope.

“A murderer hiding for thirty years turned himself in to save another murder suspect; this sounds like a fantasy story.” Tao Longyue still couldn’t get over Tan Guangsheng’s confession and only let out a long sigh after staring blankly.

“Never underestimate humans,” Xie Lanshan said. “We’re paradoxical and strange creatures. We can turn on each other in the blink of an eye for our own benefit but also repent for our sins and become saints.”

“Now that Zhang Yuchun has a witness, this proves he wasn’t lying to us. Before he arrived at the Cong residence, the true culprit had already found a way to avoid the surveillance and was hiding at the scene.” Tao Longyue turned to Xiao Liang and Ding Li. “The area near Fanluo River is still undeveloped and has no full surveillance installed. Regardless, investigate people around Cong Ying first and see who drives a red Audi.”

“There’s an easier way.” Xie Lanshan suddenly turned his head toward the entrance of the violent crime unit office. He smiled lightly as someone entered from the outside.

Shen Liufei.

“Where did Mr. Shen find the time to visit us today?” Tao Longyue still held a bit of hostility toward him. He didn’t like the way he claimed to be a disciplined Chinese man but still worked like a carefree American, spending his sweet time in vacation mode even in the face of a major case.

“I’m on duty.” Shen Liufei carried his sketchbook with him and didn’t bother giving Tao Longyue a look. Instead, he turned to Xie Lanshan. “The golden time for forensic sketches to be made is within three days of the crime. We’re already late, so we have to hurry up.”

After leaving the interrogation room, Zhang Yuchun sat by himself inside the unit office. He was given a cup of hot tea and asked to detail what happened after he arrived at the Cong residence the night of the murder. This wasn't easy for him. It had been too long, and his memories were jumbled; he couldn't piece together the scenes inside his head.

As if carefully piecing together an antique, Shen Liufei displayed patience and professionalism, guiding Zhang Yuchun to recall the situation. After slow but steady progress to piece the puzzle back together, they began to recreate a clear image of the scene.

"The lights were dim at the time. The woman who opened the door for me had a towel over her head. She was kind of hiding from me, so I thought it was the auntie who'd just come out of the shower. She invited me inside, and I also wanted to see Miss Cong too..."

After about three hours, a distinct female face began to appear on the paper.

Xie Lanshan and Tao Longyue gasped simultaneously. "Tracy!"

Battle of Wits

Tao Longyue was first surprised by the clear image, though it quickly turned into confusion. “But the surveillance clearly showed she never went inside the Cong family mansion the night of the murder.”

“You’ll have to ask Li Rui about it.” Xie Lanshan shifted his gaze toward the artist. Without a word, he signaled to Shen Liufei, and the two men got up toward the door at the same time.

“Hey, where are you guys going?” Completely out of the loop, Tao Longyue didn’t know how to react.

“Stupid melon.” Xie Lanshan flashed the car keys he held in one palm and tossed them into his other hand. “We’re paying Li Rui a visit, of course.”

They went down to the parking lot toward that green SUV. Tao Longyue instinctively invited himself to the passenger side, but Xie Lanshan blocked him. “You sit in the back. I get rides from you all the time, it’s time to switch things up and let you experience my driving skills.” Xie Lanshan opened the door and bowed slightly at Shen Liufei, then said with a brilliant smile, “After you, Mr. Shen.”

Tao Longyue did not enjoy the ride. A man’s passenger seat was a very special position. His relationship with Xie Lanshan was unique, considering they were childhood friends and rivals. Tao Longyue had once proudly announced his passenger seat was always reserved for his brother until the day he got a wife. Xie Lanshan had also responded firmly with a smile, saying it was the same for him.

But look at the situation now.

Tao Longyue sat in the back seat, listening quietly as Shen Liufei and Xie Lanshan discussed the case.

During the day of the murder, Tracy hid in Li Rui’s trunk and was taken into Jing Jiang Grand Garden. The surveillance couldn’t reach the underground parking garage connected to the mansion, allowing her to sneak in without being found out.

When it was time to act, she freed herself from the trunk using the emergency system and killed Cong Ying’s entire family at night. She first ordered a delivery using Cong Ying’s cell phone to call Zhang Yuchun, then disguised herself as the aunt. When Zhang Yuchun arrived, she knocked him out with a dose of anesthetic and arranged the crime scene, then she put the

young man's clothes and helmet on herself to run out of the house under surveillance. Finally, using Cong Ying's cell phone, she messaged Li Rui to come pick up his car and drove an unconscious Zhang Yuchun away in her own vehicle.

From start to finish, Tao Longyue felt as if he was listening to a movie script; his eyes widened in disbelief and his expressions changed like a kaleidoscope.

Xie Lanshan said, "I've already asked Emily about it. She confirmed Tracy drives a red Audi."

Tao Longyue was baffled. "When did you ask? Also... who the hell is Emily?"

"An employee from Li Rui's company. That round little girl was charmed by my looks and insisted on giving me her phone number. I couldn't refuse at the time, so I just accepted it..." Xie Lanshan turned his head to shoot a look at Shen Liufei. "Oh, don't mind me, Mr. Shen. Even though I'm as desirable as money, I swear I'm a loyal and honest man. I will never cheat on you."

Shen Liufei gave a small smile in response. "We're wasting good material not using that thick skin of yours for bulletproof vests."

Xie Lanshan shamelessly followed up the joke, "No, no, you're being too humble."

Tao Longyue couldn't withstand a moment more of the blatant flirting occurring before his eyes. "We can't convict the suspect of a crime with just a drawing and profiling. The branch office of the city's prosecutor's office has already stuck their foot in the case, thanks to some nosy higher-up that don't understand how hard our job here is at the front lines."

"The hypothetical method used requires very precise timing to work, or we would have noticed something was off when the autopsy report came in. That's why Tracy ordered grilled food that could be delivered immediately and purposely picked a fight with the restaurant owner over the phone to make sure it arrived on time," Xie Lanshan said. "We can have the restaurant owner confirm it was her voice over the phone and prove she was at the scene of the crime."

Tao Longyue was still puzzled. "If that's the case, why did Tracy have to set the surveillance room on fire? Catching Zhang Yuchun on camera would have been to her advantage."

Xie Lanshan didn't respond. He didn't have an answer yet.

"Also," Tao Longyue continued, "if the truth behind the case is as you said, then what role did Li Rui actually play? Is he an accomplice or someone completely out of the loop who happened to be caught in this mess?"

Xie Lanshan pondered. "We don't have any evidence right now, but I lean toward the former."

“Because a woman like Tracy couldn’t possibly plan and carry out such a careful murder?”

“No.” Xie Lanshan perked up his lips slightly. “It’s because he’d be too conveniently incompetent.”

Tao Longyue didn’t understand. “What do you mean? Why incompetent?”

Shen Liufei finally opened his mouth from the passenger side. “Van Dine’s twenty rules for detective stories.”

Before Tao Longyue’s rusty brain could follow up with a question, Xie Lanshan nodded. “Rule ten: The culprit must be prominent in the tale and be a character the readers understand and are interested in. The crime cannot be pinned on a completely unrelated side character. Otherwise, it shows the incompetency of the author—this applies in real life as well and not just in novels.”

“As for the role that Li Rui plays in this case, we simply need to capture Tracy and ask her.” As ridiculous and unfathomable as this excuse sounded, the two men spoke as if they had a shared script they were reciting from. Xie Lanshan gave Shen Liufei a grin. “In other words, only Mr. Shen here really knows me.”

Xie Lanshan and Tao Longyue rushed to Qiong Li Designs, only for Li Rui to say Tracy had been on sick leave for three days already.

Cong Ying’s uncle was treating Li Rui’s company like his own home and always present whenever the police came to visit. Of course, the cops were always in for another round of scolding when they crossed his path. Cong Zhiming was a stingy man who refused to even spend an extra yuan on his relatives when he was still alive. In contrast, Li Rui was more generous with money. Therefore, Cong Ying’s uncle couldn’t help but feel some regret. If his niece hadn’t died, perhaps he could have gotten more benefits from this future nephew-in-law.

The entire business district was in a temporary blackout. The rising temperature of the June weather combined with a broken air conditioning system had formed a thick layer of sweat on everyone’s faces, wiping off all their foundation and lotion. For everyone except Li Rui, that was. He dressed in a multi-layered suit and showed not a single drop of sweat. His handsome and humble demeanor was vastly different from his panic and anxiety in the interrogation room just days ago.

Li Rui turned and asked Tao Longyue, “Do you have any business with Tracy?”

Just as the last syllable dropped, Cong Ying’s uncle called out from across the office floor, “If that delivery boy ain’t the culprit, who is? All of you are privileged hooligans with overpaid salaries. You all get our tax money but can’t even do your jobs properly!”

Tao Longyue couldn't argue with the victim's family, so he focused his attention on Li Rui. "Tell us Tracy's address. We have some things to ask her regarding your girlfriend's murder."

"I don't know it, but I can ask my employees for you." Li Rui dialed an extension line and called Emily into his office. His gaze shifted from the two familiar cops onto Shen Liufei. "This is a new face. How should I address this gentleman here?"

Shen Liufei responded calmly to his suspicion, "My name is Shen Liufei."

Emily and Tracy had a fairly good relationship in the office. Even though the two often liked to gossip behind people's backs, it was never truly harmful. Emily had once driven a fatigued and sick Tracy back home, so she knew the woman's address.

Before Tao Longyue and Xie Lanshan left the building, surprisingly, Shen Liufei turned his head. "Would you like to come with us, CEO Li?"

"Of course." Li Rui smiled in response. "I also want to know who the culprit is."

Yet no one could have expected Tracy would be dead by the time they found her.

She had died inside her red Audi.

The sun was bright; a crowd of people screamed around the car. A security guard held up a chair to break the window, while someone from the other side of the car called out, "I saw this car parked here two days ago—I thought she was just sleeping!"

Furious at himself for arriving too late, Captain Tao called the municipal bureau in frustration. He inspected the scene while the forensic science team was en route. Judging from the corpse's appearance, Tracy had died over forty-eight hours ago. After the window was broken, the car reeked of the foul smell.

Inside the car's enclosed space was a pot of coal already fully burnt off. Wide, black vinyl tape covered all the windows and doors from the inside.

Shen Liufei studied Xie Lanshan. In the face of a horrific corpse that reeked of rotten flesh, this young cop's expression was focused and unfazed—and even displayed excitement.

"Xie Lanshan, look." Shen Liufei pointed at the window on the passenger's side. The whole car resembled a completely closed space at first glance, but upon closer inspection, one window was not fully rolled up. An easily missed gap was left between the window and the ceiling of the door.

Xie Lanshan pressed his eyebrows together slightly, his gaze fixed on the tiny gap. Suddenly, he recalled something. "*He Wouldn't Kill Patience*."

Shen Liufei smiled. "John Dickson Carr."

Coming to the same conclusion, the two turned around at the same time to give Li Rui a quick glance.

"How could such a young and beautiful woman commit suicide?"

People loved dramatic plot twists. Soon after, they began chatting among themselves. Li Rui appeared to discuss Tracy's death along with the crowd of bystanders, but he was isolated from the masses. Feeling some gazes on him, he met the eyes of Xie Lanshan and Shen Liufei.

Li Rui's expression was unfathomable, and so too was it unknown whether he was upset or joyful. However, for an instant, something flashed across those dark eyes of his, something which only Xie Lanshan caught. It was fiery and familiar, with a hint of an ambiguous smile and nuanced arrogance.

For a moment, the man who had always seemed humble and modest suddenly had become a haughty madman.

(ii)

The homicide and violent crime unit team members busted through the door to Tracy's house. After a round of inspection, they discovered Cong Ying's cell phone and the latest version of a digital decoder for car doors—the kind often used on the black market to break into vehicles.

Tao Longyue said, "Looks like your theory was right. Tracy hid behind Li Rui's car and snuck inside the mansion from the underground parking garage, successfully hid from the surveillance cameras, and killed Cong Ying's whole family." Li Rui's personal secretary could easily steal the man's password and code to unlock his car at any time, allowing her to carry out the murder.

The team made some new discoveries as well. Tracy had a side Weibo account created a year ago that detailed how much she loved Li Rui and hated Cong Ying. It was filled with an entire year's worth of rants about her unrequited love for Li Rui. She didn't bother hiding her contemplation of murder. The latest entries also detailed a secret plan of how she would carry one out.

The very first entry was sincere and almost tragic: *He is the home I've yearned for my whole life, the utopia I cannot reach. The world would be a better place if Cong Ying didn't exist.*

As the investigation continued, the mist of mystery began to disperse and the truth behind the Cong family murder also came to light. Li Rui's parking space was reserved, but while the old garage didn't have a well-rounded surveillance system, the old manager confirmed a red Audi was in the garage for many days.

"Tracy parked her car at the place days before the murder and borrowed Cong Ying's cell phone to lure Li Rui to drive his car back. While she waited

for the man to arrive, she carried Zhang Yuchun to the back of her own car and drove it over to Fanluo River to dispose of him. Clearly, Zhang Yuchun was just a poor scapegoat used for the murder. That woman sure is something. If Uncle Tan hadn't accidentally gotten involved in the case, regardless of whether Zhang Yuchun had been dead or alive, she would have walked out and never gotten punishment for her crimes." In the face of such a meticulously calculated plan, Tao Longyue couldn't help but stare in awe. "This case is finally settled. Judging by the Weibo posts from a year ago, Li Rui seemed to be completely oblivious, while Tracy's motive has come to light. She knew her crimes would be exposed and finally committed suicide before she could be caught."

Xie Lanshan frowned, Shen Liufei remained silent; the two seemed to be deep in thought and unconvinced.

Tao Longyue asked, "What, do you two still have questions? The car's a completely enclosed space. Tracy was clearly under the influence of alcohol when she burned the coal and committed suicide. She's a damn scary woman who could kill an entire family for love."

Xie Lanshan answered with a question: "Have you never read John Dickson Carr before?"

Tao Longyue didn't understand. "What? Who? Jack? Johnson?"

"John Dickson Carr." Xie Lanshan rolled his eyes; clearly, Captain Tao didn't know about this American mystery novelist. "Please, bro, go read more books."

"These mystery novels don't even relate to real life." Tao Longyue pouted in anger, trying to excuse himself. "Besides, why are you of all people trying to act all highly educated around me? I know you weren't an A student when you were younger. What do you know about Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie? I bet you couldn't identify a Jin Yong novel if you saw one. If Song Qilian didn't write little cheat sheets for you back then during every exam or test, I bet you wouldn't have even gotten the grades to graduate high school—"

Beaten down like a small animal, Xie Lanshan sneakily glanced at Shen Liufei. "Good brothers don't dig up each other's dark pasts. Man, don't try and make me look bad in front of Mr. Shen."

Without wasting any spare energy on their bickering, Shen Liufei turned toward Ding Li to say cordially, "Please bring a roll of wide tape over here and ask if anyone on the investigation team has a car vacuum cleaner."

Ding Li quickly brought over a small battery-charged model and borrowed a car from the municipal bureau to show firsthand how this locked room murder was created.

"John Dickson Carr was an American mystery novelist. In one of his books titled *He Wouldn't Kill Patience*, he detailed a crime scene using this exact

tape method. After fabricating a suicide, the culprit taped up all the doors and windows inside the car and left only one rolled down, allowing themselves to climb out. The short end was half-taped from the interior of the car on the side close to the glass window but not fully sealed. Then the culprit would stand and carefully roll up the window using the car key while adjusting the position of the tape inside. Finally, he would leave a small gap between the top of the window frame and the glass and then carefully place the head of the vacuum tube on the small gap..."

Shen Liufei turned on the vacuum. Following the loud sound of the engine, the half-sealed tape inside the car quickly rolled up onto the interior glass.

The locked room was perfectly recreated.

"As long as the culprit had the car key, they could always redo the tape if it didn't seal properly the first time," Xie Lanshan added. "Tracy could get Li Rui's car keys as his secretary, but the reverse is true for Li Rui."

"Okay, Watson Shen and Lanshan Holmes, where's the evidence?" After a brief moment of surprise, Tao Longyue quickly recovered his professional demeanor. "I'm personally amazed by the range of knowledge you two have and the amazing tricks up your sleeves, but you know this is completely useless in court. By the time the case opens, Prosecutor Yunxian could easily let Li Rui go clean. Besides, how are you all planning on convincing those old men from the branch office? What will you do if they ask for evidence? Are you going to say you don't have any, and have only got your theory?"

Tao Longyue successfully shut Xie Lanshan's mouth. The chief of the prosecutor's branch office was Tang Yichuan, a man who loved justice as much as he hated evil. Any criminal falling into his hands would face harsh consequences without exception; similarly, he was also very strict and harsh when treating his fellow law enforcement colleagues serving the same system.

At that time, Xiao Liang came in with a report. The technicians had compared the soles of the shoes from Tracy's home: the footprint left behind at the Cong family mansion did not match her shoeprint.

While unexpected, it was within reason. This explained why Tracy had set the surveillance room on fire—in actuality, she never had. Someone else had been at the crime scene on the night of the murder.

Captain Tao was a simple-minded man. Even if Xie Lanshan tried to explain Li Rui's motive and method of murder, the captain's only response would be to think of Fu Yunxian and Tang Yichuan. In the captain's mind, the strictness of procedure could not be ignored, especially in a world where only hard evidence had value in the court.

Seeing he couldn't knock any sense into this man's head, Xie Lanshan physically kicked him out of the car. "Piss off." Xie Lanshan dragged Tao Longyue out of the back seat. "I'm going to discuss the case tonight with Mr.

Shen. Don't drag our intelligence down to your level, you pea brain."

Before Captain Tao could react, the military-green SUV had already driven off, leaving only a trail of smog behind its wheels.

They decided to meet at Shen Liufei's house once again. Their discussion about the case was a lie; the truth was they were getting booze. Xie Lanshan hadn't gotten enough of the Latour from last time; that unique smoky but fruity wine left an impression. Its aroma was so alluring and its companionship so vibrant and lively—to put it simply, the man missed his wine.

The moment they stepped in, the building manager greeted Shen Liufei and cordially called him Mr. Shen. Then a handful of young women came to greet him as if they were following a celebrity and offered some gifts.

Shen Liufei's art classes had just ended, and these students weren't ready to say goodbye. The witty young women had found his address and come to offer him flowers and gifts. The bouquet was full of vibrant colors, and prominently featured fresh roses. The petals still carried fresh dewdrops, glowing like the beautiful young women around him.

The building manager saw Shen Liufei wasn't interested in the gifts and thought the man was in a bad mood. He chimed in to say the girls had wanted to wait until their teacher came back but he shooed them away, and he even offered to throw away the gifts.

"No need. I'll bring them up." Shen Liufei maintained his manners even when the girls had left and brought all the gifts upstairs.

"You sure you're gonna keep that?" Xie Lanshan asked. "Didn't you say you don't like them?"

"I'll keep it for a few days," Shen Liufei said. "I'll toss it when they wither."

Xie Lanshan once again decided the artist was quite curious. Some people were quiet because they could not communicate; others remained quiet because they disliked socializing. Shen Liufei was usually simply too lazy to speak up. This man before him clearly had a gentle and kind heart, but insisted on creating a cold and distant façade around others.

It was almost time for dinner, so Shen Liufei decided to cook and welcome his guest. The respectable Mr. Shen was tall, with broad shoulders and long legs, but in that instance, his apron wrapped neatly around his narrow waist in a beautifully domestic scene.

"Can you hand me the scissors?" The main dish was steak. Shen Liufei prepared the chicken to make some fresh broth.

Xie Lanshan followed the master's orders and found a bone-cutter in a kitchen drawer. Yet, just as the cook turned around to receive it, Xie Lanshan threw the scissors toward Shen Liufei's face without warning.

This sudden attack would have caught anyone off guard. No matter how good a person's eyesight was, they would only see a black silhouette slice through the air. Nevertheless, Shen Liufei caught the scissors with his hand and reversed the sharp edges to point them at Xie Lanshan's neck. His hand gripped the handle with his nondominant left hand.

"Sharp objects are dangerous," Shen Liufei said without any visible expression on his face. His eyes were cold and sharp like needles, and his voice flat and calm.

Only a few millimeters of distance separated Xie Lanshan's throat and the tip of the scissors. He carefully moved his neck away from the blade. A smile still hung on his face. "Your reaction's better than that li'l shit Tao. I knew you wouldn't get hurt."

"I'm talking about you." Shen Liufei's hand pointed the tip of the blade again at Xie Lanshan's throat. "I could have killed you earlier out of self-defense."

Grinning, Xie Lanshan shifted his gaze downward. "Don't be so sure."

Shen Liufei followed the direction of the young cop's gaze. The man was also holding a knife, currently pointed at his stomach, ready to jab into flesh if the scissors moved any closer to the cop's throat.

Liufei smiled. He let go of Xie Lanshan and went back to cooking the soup.

This spur-of-the-moment act somehow drew out an unexpected new discovery. Xie Lanshan said, "I didn't know you were left-handed."

"You're not completely correct." Shen Liufei switched a hand to hold the scissors and continued cooking; he was ambidextrous.

The sky dimmed outside. The tops of the skyscrapers were the closest spaces to the sky witnessing the gradient of darkness pouring down toward the ground.

Goose liver, fresh oysters, and the medium-well steak was a dinner much more fitting for red wine than Uncle Tan's spicy hot pot. Xie Lanshan seemed to have developed a new appreciation for food recently, feeling his regular meals of instant noodles and dry crackers were completely wasted.

"A blessing, a true blessing." Xie Lanshan couldn't help but praise the fancy meal he'd never had. After finally finishing the dinner, he said, "If I were a woman, I would vow the rest of my life to you in appreciation and swear to never marry anyone else."

"No need, you better find a different way to thank me." Shooting a provocative glance at Xie Lanshan, Shen Liufei didn't seem to consider it a compliment and took a sip of wine from his glass. His judging stare was elegant, even with his blatant complaint. "Spending the rest of your life with me sounds more like a threat than it does gratitude."

Unbothered even after receiving an insult, Xie Lanshan picked out a rose from the bouquet of flowers and handed it to Shen Liufei. “Here you go.”

Shen Liufei remained unamused. “This is the most insincere floral offering I’ve ever seen.”

“What about this then?” Xie Lanshan put the rose in his mouth and lifted his chin slightly, shoving his face closer to Shen Liufei. Xie Lanshan’s white teeth peeked out from his slight smile; his eyes were clear and sincere.

For a quick moment, Shen Liufei’s breath was taken away; this man had clean and handsome features; he was inexplicably stunning. He thought, *This man is beautiful, almost too pretty*. His beauty, revered and envied by many, transcended gender.

Within an instant, he leaned forward toward Xie Lanshan, lowered his head, and pressed their lips together. Their foreheads touched as their lips brushed against one another, their breathing in sync. Xie Lanshan stared wide-eyed, completely frozen as Shen Liufei took the rose in his own thin lips.

Shen Liufei pulled the tip of the rose’s stem and gently repositioned the flower. Avoiding the sharp thorns, he pressed a kiss on a faint tooth mark—the place Xie Lanshan had bitten earlier.

Finally, he took the rose out and placed it beside his left hand with his usual emotionless expression. “Thanks.”

Slowly, Xie Lanshan felt his soul return to his body. He cleared his throat awkwardly and asked a relatively silly question, “You... why do you... ahem... why do you hate roses?”

“Artists often use roses as symbols for women and feminism.” He paused slightly. “I don’t mean anything bad. Women are nice, but—”

He abruptly stopped. Shen Liufei locked his eyes on Xie Lanshan.

Even someone as thick-skinned as Xie Lanshan could understand.

But you aren’t interested in women.

Discussing the case a little more at the dinner table, the two men came to a shared conclusion. Even if Zhang Yuchun was relatively short, he was still a man. Transporting and tossing a whole adult away was virtually impossible to do alone for someone as small as Tracy. There could be more parties involved, but the most important part was they still couldn’t identify the woman behind the footprint.

Perhaps inspired by Shen Liufei’s act and earlier words, Xie Lanshan suddenly had a thought. “Cong Ying once admitted to being harassed at work and came out about it to her friends in chat. She said the blackmailing and stalking happened afterward. We’ve always assumed this woman who sent the threat was a wife or female family member of the male harasser, but had no luck in our investigation. What if we were also being misled here—why

couldn't Cong Ying have been sexually harassed by a woman?"

(iii)

Today, Xie Lanshan was supposed to go to therapy at Song Qilian's clinic. When Shen Liufei reminded him and he saw a name flash quietly on his cell phone screen, he realized he had completely forgotten about the appointment. The man had turned his phone to silent mode the moment he stepped inside the Shen household.

He had unread messages on WeChat and a handful of unanswered calls. Xie Lanshan sent a short message back to Song Qilian before noticing it was almost midnight already.

The alcohol in the Latour kicked in, and Xie Lanshan felt a little dizzy. Pressing his hand on his forehead, he looked up at the night sky, which had completely darkened as if a muddy curtain had fallen from the heavens. Within the blink of an eye, dark clouds covered the stars, creating a backdrop of blackness.

The rain was inevitable tonight.

"You can stay for the night." The owner of the house noticed the strangeness in his guest's expression. "There is unopened clean underwear in the drawers, and if you don't mind, I can lend you one of my shirts."

Accepting the invitation, Xie Lanshan took a shower first. He wrapped his lower body with a towel and walked out of the bathroom shirtless. The living space was a large, one-story unit without a guest room. He wandered about the living room, studying the large, light gray sofa that looked as stiff and hard as a rock. Then he turned away after deciding it would be too uncomfortable. He once again walked toward Shen Liufei's bedroom.

Shen Liufei was painting. Xie Lanshan stopped by the door, knowing he was the subject of the art.

Shen Liufei heard the sound of footsteps and turned his head, studying Xie Lanshan's half-naked body. His gaze glossed over the young officer's chest to his firm six-pack. "You have no scars despite being a former antidrug officer."

"I'm just a bit luckier than others." Xie Lanshan fell into a brief silence. The majority were less fortunate.

"Where are you sleeping tonight?" Shen Liufei asked.

The million-dollar question. Xie Lanshan refused to curl up on that hard sofa in the living room; he looked toward the bed, which was wide enough to fit the two men.

"I don't have a habit of sharing a bed with the same sex, but..." Xie Lanshan lifted a leg, inviting himself to lie down. Despite knowing very well he was the freeloader, he still pretended to hesitate. "After being fed by you

and now taken in by you, I guess I can spare some space for you here."

Shen Liufei lowered his head slightly, and gazed right between Xie Lanshan's open legs.

"Too small," Shen Liufei said coldly in disinterest. "You can sleep on the sofa."

"Are you saying this is too small?" Extremely offended, Xie Lanshan jumped from the bed. "Listen here, even my brothers all call me tripod-man!"

This shameless lad had quite the creative mind. Shen Liufei laughed, his perpetually expressionless and cold mien finally showing a hint of warmth and fatigue. Though the changes were too nuanced to notice unless one inspected his face closely, the man was much more amiable than he normally presented himself.

His attitude was still aloof and distanced, but he did say goodnight.

Xie Lanshan was too tall to fit on the sofa. Lying on his side, he watched the warm light coming from Shen Liufei's room.

He soon fell asleep to the gentle rustling sound in the background that was almost like the sound of raindrops falling on leaves or a pencil grinding on paper.

For the first time in a long while, Xie Lanshan didn't dream of that woman in the white dress. He had a good night's sleep.

A little past eight in the morning, the two men left the building. Xie Lanshan was rested and had had a full-course meal; he greeted the morning in an awfully good mood. Not caring that Shen Liufei remained cool and standoffish, he wrapped an arm around the artist, insisting on calling him "big bro Shen" as if the two were much closer than friends.

Before they arrived at the car's parking space, Shen Liufei suddenly turned his head, but no one was under the tree behind him. An elderly man not too far behind was taking a quiet morning walk.

"What's wrong?" Xie Lanshan asked.

"Nothing." Shen Liufei pressed his eyebrows slightly, turned around, and opened the car door. The wind blew gently through the green leaves; the sounds of bird chirps and cicadas' cries created a symphony of summer.

Yet he had felt someone watching him in the darkness.

The two returned to the municipal bureau and told Tao Longyue their new theory regarding the footprint. Captain Tao immediately called to prepare a new list of female suspects who could have sexually harassed Cong Ying.

The clear print left at the scene of the crime pointed to the biological characteristics of the suspects. Xiao Liang also took some police dogs to the scene for further investigation. With the help of the new footprint technology that had kept Tan Guangsheng on his toes, the investigation team finally locked in on the fourth suspect of the case.

(iv)

The result was beyond anyone's imagination. Cong Ying's stalker and harasser, and the person who had set the surveillance room on fire, turned out to be Cong Ying's former boss, Lang Li.

Faced with incontrovertible footprint evidence, the woman had no choice but to admit her crimes. Without giving any excuses, she finally confessed. However, she was convinced the police couldn't do anything to her and merely shrugged her shoulders. "I didn't kill anyone. I just wanted to take a look at her that night."

Xie Lanshan said, "You left your footprints in the backyard and in the surveillance room. Are you really saying you set the room on fire and spied on someone at two in the morning just because you wanted to 'take a look' at her? That isn't normal."

The woman laughed. "I did want to kill her, but contemplating murder isn't actually a crime, right?"

"No, but arson is." Tao Longyue was usually more courteous to female suspects and didn't spew out curses; however, his face was stern and cold, and his gaze burned in fury. "Why did you want to kill her?"

Lang Li didn't seem to have any respect for human life. "Her boyfriend stopped talking to her for a while because her family objected to their marriage. Her relationship with her family was also at a breaking point, so I invited her to stay at my place for about a week. We spent the day and night together like intimate friends, but the moment her boyfriend apologized, she returned to his side. I thought of her as my best friend and even as a partner, but I didn't know the shameless bitch couldn't live without a man. I felt like my feelings were betrayed, so I imagined getting revenge."

"And that's why you wanted to kill her?"

"Not really." The interrogation had dragged on for quite a while already, and the woman was losing her initial spirit. She turned to Xie Lanshan in a slightly uncomfortable manner. "Hey, handsome officer, can you give me a smoke?"

Xie Lanshan reached a hand into his pocket, only to discover he had forgotten to bring a pack, almost as if his strange tobacco addiction had vanished. Because he had been serving his punishment, he hadn't met this suspect during the early phase of the case. Now, he carefully studied the woman and determined from his experience as an antidrug officer that she was a drug addict. "You're taking drugs, aren't you?"

Lang Li knew she couldn't hide before public security. "I don't touch H, but I do use a bit of ice and diet coke."

From the way she used slang, she was an experienced abuser. Xie Lanshan's expression darkened. "Let's talk about the murder first."

"I didn't think about killing Cong Ying at first either. Her boyfriend Li Rui brought it up to me." From the sounds of it, Li Rui discovered Lang Li was harassing his girlfriend and spoke to her behind Cong Ying's back. "I wanted to save Cong Ying from her troubled relationship, but she said I was disturbing her private life. I was terribly upset, so I lied and told that Li guy Cong Ying was cheating on him."

"And he believed you?" Tao Longyue didn't seem convinced.

"I took some pictures during the time Cong Ying stayed with me, and some men and women in some intimate poses. Mr. Li believed me. He was convinced he was being cheated on, and his face practically turned green too. I thought they were going to break up, only to discover they got back together as if nothing happened and even planned on attending a wedding exhibit." The woman shrugged and laughed. "Only a silly girl like Cong Ying would be blinded by love. Her boyfriend was much pettier than he seemed. I'm sure he also held a grudge against that young, handsome artist too."

Xie Lanshan and Tao Longyue exchanged glances. Li Rui pretended to have never met Shen Liufei when they visited Qiong Li Design. Clearly, he was trying to hide something.

Xie Lanshan asked, "So how did you meet that handsome artist?"

"CEO Li is a huge fan. Cong Ying originally signed up for the art classes to get his autograph for her boyfriend. Except, for some reason, Li Rui thought his girlfriend had a thing with him; maybe the man was insecure and couldn't handle seeing such a handsome lad walk so close to his girlfriend. So, I took the opportunity to send some flowers to her using the artist's name, pushing the narrative his girlfriend really cheated."

Sticks and stones couldn't break one's bones, but who knew that a single malicious line could cost someone's life? Tao Longyue suppressed his anger. "What happened after?"

"Then I set the surveillance room on fire and checked to see if I could crawl into her house from her backyard. But by the time I was close enough to the mansion to see through the window cracks, I noticed the dead bodies and knew someone dealt with her before I had the chance. I was glad, so I left."

When the two officers left the interrogation room, Ding Li was already waiting outside. She'd found more evidence regarding Lang Li.

"What is it?" Tao Longyue asked.

"Remember how we added each other on WeChat the first time? She sent me lots of messages and said I'm pretty. She even called and tried to invite me to her house. I didn't think much about it earlier. I just thought that I'd made a new friend."

Xie Lanshan asked, “So you never went to her place?”

“No, I went once. Her house is huge, almost like a castle. Her attitude was also really weird. I can’t really put my finger on it, but I just didn’t feel comfortable. I found an excuse to leave as soon as I could; I never went back. But she would still call me up every once in a while and try to invite me to some sort of nightclub—”

“She invited you to a nightclub?” Tao Longyue yelled at Ding Li. “How come you didn’t report the strangeness or the event to us immediately?!”

“What’s so strange about it?” Ding Li pouted. “Have you heard of slashies? Our generation of youths have this new lifestyle where you have multiple careers with different identities. For example, you can be a white-collared worker by day and a hostess at a club by night; it’s pretty normal now, so I didn’t think much about it.”

“There’s really a name for that?” Dumbstruck, Tao Longyue turned to Xie Lanshan for confirmation.

Unwilling to waste any more energy on this man, Xie Lanshan decided to shift his focus to the case. “She’s a department manager of a small company with a standard salary of less than twenty thousand yuan a year. Yet she lives in a mansion, drives a luxury-brand car, and even has spare money to use drugs. Where do you think her money comes from?”

Tao Longyue nodded. “So what are your thoughts about this woman?”

Xie Lanshan spoke from his experience as a drug officer. “I have a lot of suspicions. I can almost guarantee a bigger boss behind her holds a major supply of drugs, but this woman is likely not directly involved in the homicide case.”

“I thought the same. Either way, send her off for a urine test and keep her in custody. We’ll continue our investigation.” Tao Longyue nodded and then let out a long sigh. “Li Rui’s much more suspicious now that we’ve heard her account. During his first interrogation, he said he never read *The Brink of Light and Dark* and pretended he didn’t know Shen Liufei. This fits the initial profiling you guys had of the culprit. Who knew that after all this circling and investigating, the culprit was this same guy we had our eyes on the whole time?”

“This is the peak of a twisted murderer. Not only can they enjoy the thrill of killing their enemy with their own hands, but they can also enjoy toying with the police by manipulating the investigation.” Xie Lanshan faintly smiled. “In some ways, I do admire this man.”

“But how do we prove he’s the true culprit? The surveillance showed Cong Ying still alive when he left the mansion. He didn’t return to take his car until two in the morning.”

“Tracy’s death could be reclassified as a homicide now that the locked-room mystery is solved. I suggest we pull up the surveillance footage during the night of the murder from all around the mansion. The woman dressed in yellow who covered her face might not have been Cong Ying; it could have been Tracy in disguise. The neighbors only said they saw the yellow dress and not necessarily the face. They were distracted and misled by the argument.”

Tao Longyue asked, “Then what’s Li Rui’s motive? Even if he was cheated on, he really didn’t have a reason to murder a whole family.”

“I know.” Ding Li was a sharp young woman and sensitive to emotions, allowing her to empathize and analyze motives from the suspects’ standpoints. “Think about what he went through when he was younger. His father dipped into business very early on in hopes of becoming rich during his generation. Soon after, his father went bankrupt, committed insurance fraud, suicide... that’s literally a fall from heaven straight to hell. Li Rui is both prideful and insecure, then had to suffer all the awful treatment from the Cong family for his girlfriend. This must have taken a toll on him and nourished his ill intentions. Then the news of his girlfriend’s betrayal was likely the last straw. All of the hatred he’d built up developed into homicidal intent—”

“This might be true, but that’s not all.”

Everyone turned. Shen Liufei stood by the door.

Tao Longyue still didn’t like Shen Liufei and scowled in displeasure, speaking in an unwelcoming tone, “You didn’t kill the man, but you still wished ill on others.”

“I paid Li Xiangqian’s old friends a visit and made a new discovery.” Shen Liufei looked at Xie Lanshan. “An old friend in the same business as Li Xiangqian said he gave the project and funding to Old Li back then. Li Xiangqian was very grateful for him and promised to repay the friend if the project succeeded. Yet the man committed suicide before he could officially accept. Why leave his sickly wife and only son? His business was also seeing a bit of hope and not at the point of losing everything, so it didn’t make sense to take his own life before anything could change.”

“What you’re saying is...” Xie Lanshan pressed his eyebrows together and pondered aloud, “That car accident many years ago wasn’t a suicide. It was a homicide.”

(v)

Xie Lanshan once again knocked on Li Rui’s door. However, he came alone this time, against proper procedure. He never followed the rules strictly, of course—especially in the last few months.

Inside Li Rui's office, the two men sat face-to-face. Xie Lanshan pulled his chair forward and toward Li Rui like an overenthusiastic candidate applying to get a job. "I'm here to inform you that you've been restricted from travel as a suspect of this case."

"I also hope you find and arrest the culprit soon and close the case." Li Rui didn't seem bothered, though his travel restrictions could potentially hinder business activities. Instead, he spoke with acceptance. "Cooperating with the police to solve this case is of utmost importance to civilians."

Xie Lanshan glanced at the large bookshelf behind Li Rui. It held books by John Dickson Carr and Clayton Rawson, both known for their locked-room mysteries and as masters of perfect crimes.

Facing Li Rui, Xie Lanshan quietly recited a line from Carr's *It Walks By Night*: "And not least foul among these night-monsters, which may be found even in our pleasant land of France, is a certain shape of evil hue which by day may not be recognized, inasmuch as it may be a man of favored looks, or a fair and smiling woman; but by night becomes a misshapen beast with blood-bedabbled claws."

The intelligent man understood the implications; unfazed, Li Rui responded with a smile. "I asked my colleagues to purchase these books for me. Everyone in the company is a master of locked-rooms since that is the nature of our business."

Li Rui removed the suspicion with ease, thinking the officer may have obtained new evidence with his fingerprint or footprint from Tracy's house. However, he was prepared to answer any questions; he was the woman's boss and friend. Visiting her place wouldn't be unnatural. In fact, anyone from the company could have visited her house and left DNA samples at her residence.

"Indeed, any employee who knows Tracy is on the suspect list," Xie Lanshan agreed with his explanation and nodded. Then he lifted an eyebrow and shifted the conversation back to the man before him. "But not everyone would buy two of the same Gucci dress for themselves. It took us a while to find proper evidence, but you purchased two bright yellow dresses at two different stores, like Cong Ying wore the day before her murder."

"I'm a very insecure person due to my family history, so I have a habit of buying two when I go shopping—especially limited luxury items."

"So, where's the other dress?"

"Don't know." Li Rui shrugged. "I might have lost it, or had it stolen, or maybe I tossed it away myself without even realizing. You can't possibly arrest me because I bought an extra dress, right? A case needs decisive evidence to be considered closed."

"I do have decisive evidence." Leaning forward, Xie Lanshan lowered his voice. "I'm sure you are dying to know who left the footprint behind at the

mansion and set the surveillance room on fire. Do you want to know who almost destroyed your most important alibi? I can tell you we found that person, and unfortunately, she saw you return to the scene of the crime to clean up the evidence."

Xie Lanshan's words were firm even though the fire destroyed all surveillance footage after 2 A.M. Yet he was certain a calculating and witty criminal like Li Rui would return to the crime scene with the excuse of picking up his car. From the timeline of the murder, he had already murdered Cong Ying's family by 11:30. Soon after, he faked an argument with Tracy disguised as Cong Ying and left Jing Jiang Grand Garden. He couldn't possibly have set up such an intricate murder within such a short time. Someone like him would never easily trust anyone to do the job for him. He would personally check Tracy's work after the murder to ensure everything went as planned.

"You're simply bluffing." To the officer's surprise, Li Rui didn't break a sweat and remained composed. Losing one's cool was the number one taboo in a battle between high intellectuals. The man had certainly returned to the scene of the crime, just as the officer said, to ensure he didn't leave any traces behind. Convinced, Officer Xie had prepared a voice recorder in the hopes to collect audio evidence from him, but Li Rui smiled. "If you indeed had such an important witness, you would have already requested for my arrest from your superiors, am I right?"

"All right, you're too smart. I can't scare you." Showing a hint of defeat on his face, Xie Lanshan pulled out the mini audio recorder, then turned it off. He slammed it onto the marble desk. "That woman didn't stay for too long in the backyard, so you returned after she left to arrange the crime scene."

Li Rui smiled, regretful yet proud, as everything was just as he had planned. Just like a game of Go focused on protecting oneself while taking the opponent down, the game only had truly begun after the murder. From the very beginning when the police suspected him, then removed him from the list of suspects for another individual, then narrowing back down to him from Tracy's suicide. These investigators had never had any hard evidence and were played like puppets, just like in *The Brink of Light and Dark* he was very fond of.

And what immense fun it was.

"Yet not everyone is as smart as you, Mr. Li Rui." Xie Lanshan tossed a urine test report before Li Rui. "The woman who set the surveillance room on fire also happened to be a drug addict; the minimum sentence is three years in prison if one is caught with illegal drugs. Now take a wild guess—if I promised to erase her criminal record and swear to no longer pursue her possession of drugs, would that trigger a sudden change in her memories? Do

you think maybe she would coincidentally see you rearranging the crime scene from the window of the backyard?"

Li Rui's expression changed slightly; Xie Lanshan's reaction was completely unexpected. He had never imagined a cop would say something like this. "You're a cop. There's no way you—"

Suddenly, Xie Lanshan stepped forward and pressed down on the back of Li Rui's neck. Li Rui attempted to lift his head but couldn't move. The force was extremely powerful; he found himself unable to fight back.

"Do you not understand what I said? As long as a murderer receives the punishment they deserve under the law, I don't mind having to resort to some unconventional methods to get them to court." Xie Lanshan's eyes stared into the man like a beast enjoying the anxious look in the gaze of his prey. A cold smile rose on his face. The handsome man's grin was dangerously alluring but cold, like fresh crimson blood on a lifeless corpse.

Xie Lanshan leaned by Li Rui's ear. "I fight poison with poison, send evil off with evil; this is my personal philosophy."

From this one glance, Li Rui understood they were the same type of people. Only a corrupt soul could emit this kind of emotion behind their eyes when they smiled—that cold, bloodthirsty, overwhelming darkness.

Smiling, Xie Lanshan let go of Li Rui. He stood up and walked backward out of the latter's office.

"So, I'm sure we'll meet again soon, and when that happens..." Xie Lanshan pressed his index and middle finger together and pointed at Li Rui, gesturing a gunshot at the man's head. Then, right in front of Li Rui, he pressed his fingers on his lips. In memory of the late secretary Tracy and for Emily and every female employee in the office who had given him an admiring glance, he blew a kiss and turned around, walking out of the building in style.

(vi)

Since the surprising confrontation the other day, Li Rui had been waiting for the officer to show up again. Unexpectedly, someone else knocked on his door first. Li Rui dressed up and prepared for the occasion. He washed his face, shaved, wore his most luxurious suit, and carefully brushed every strand of hair like a knight putting on his armor ready to enter a harsh battle.

"Sorry for making you wait." Li Rui entered the door. This was his residence, and he had just made a call outside. Li Rui seemed to be extra careful today. He asked Shen Liufei boldly, "Can you turn off your phone? I don't want our conversation to be recorded."

Under Li Rui's gaze, Shen Liufei took out his phone and turned it off.

The latter studied Shen Liufei suspiciously, still unable to relax.

"Do you want to search me?" Shen Liufei chuckled. It was small but unamused, and he held his hands out in a posture to let the other man search him, showing he carried no other recording devices.

This was a one-on-one battle. To dwell on this issue any longer would make him seem insecure; Li Rui maintained the cordial smile and gestured toward the sofa. "Please have a seat." After Shen Liufei sat down, he said, "I'm still surprised you called yesterday."

"I'm not here for the homicide case. At least that's not the only reason." Shen Liufei handed a copy of his *The Brink of Light and Dark* to Li Rui. "I only just found out she enrolled in my class because of you. Cong Ying was a great student: she was smart and creative."

Li Rui couldn't stand listening to this man praise his late girlfriend. He still assumed that their relationship was not quite as simple as he thought. He reached out a hand to receive the book; the smile in the corner of his mouth twitched slightly as he attempted to put on a collected front.

"Are you not going to open it up?" Shen Liufei asked.

"I've read it already." There was no reason to hide anymore; he trusted the other man wasn't recording their conversation. "I'm a fan of all your works, I also want to collect all of your books."

"Then our conversation will go more smoothly." Shen Liufei nodded in satisfaction. "I'm here for another case. I went and visited some of your father's old friends and received some new evidence from one of them. So now I have a reason to suspect the car crash wasn't an accident, nor a suicide to commit insurance fraud. He was murdered."

At the mention of the old case, Li Rui's eyes widened. A hint of pain flashed across his eyes as he shook his head and laughed bitterly. "That was over two decades ago. What's the point of bringing this up now?"

Shen Liufei didn't answer this question. "I have another theory. Some unknown motive drove Cong Zhiming to kill your father; he loosened the screw between the brakes and oil pipe on the car. Your father desperately attempted to brake right before the crash, but vacuum-oil brakes malfunction if the oil inside the pipes leaks out. In the final moments of his life, he crashed into a truck, and his car was demolished. Your father died almost instantly. The scene of the accident was unbearable..."

Shen Liufei had researched the car crash very closely. Every word out of his mouth struck Li Rui's heart like a sharpshooter.

"That's enough!" The terrible scene filled with pieces of human flesh, organs, and blood reappeared before Li Rui. He covered his mouth, trying to hold back a sudden urge to vomit. After a while, he caught his own breath and gave a small grin to Shen Liufei. "I was still young back then, so I don't

remember anything."

"Of course you remember. I would guess you study mystery novels in the hopes of acting out a perfect crime to take revenge for your father." Shen Liufei scanned the surroundings. Like his own office, Li Rui's living space was filled with mystery novels and crime-themed artwork. "As for why you founded this successful escape room company, perhaps it was an offhand project you were playing with."

Li Rui smiled and shrugged without a response.

"Let me guess why you tossed the murder weapon at the Crane Museum. First, Cong Ying's struggle left some of your DNA under her fingernails, and because you were worried about leaving evidence, you had no choice but to chop her hands off and set the scene up to replicate my painting. Second, you were certain we had some sort of relationship and wanted to pin the blame on me. But I don't understand. Why didn't you ask Tracy? You wouldn't need to appear in the surveillance either." Shen Liufei pondered for a moment. "Is it because the arson in the surveillance room came unexpected? The police had already knocked on your door. Was it because she was too anxious? Perhaps it was because she refused to carry out the murder weapon and the hands?"

"Women can be cowards sometimes." Li Rui laughed. "And you certainly are my idol."

"Perhaps this was also when you thought about killing Tracy. Only the dead can keep a secret forever, after all."

"You can make whatever assumptions you want." Li Rui kept his smile, still refusing to admit to his crimes.

"But even a perfect crime is no match to the human heart," Shen Liufei said coolly. "You truly fell in love with Cong Ying."

Shen Liufei's gaze fixed on Li Rui the whole time he spoke, staring right into those void-like eyes—those eyes like a rabid hound holding its pent-up anger inside. Those eyes like an innocuous dog hiding a gruesome injury that pierced its underside. He looked at Li Rui as though the man were an obsessed gambler who had never seen defeat until his very last round, the one in which he would lose everything in the bet of a lifetime.

Just as Shen Liufei had determined in his initial profiling with Xie Lanshan, Li Rui both loved and hated Cong Ying.

"Your plan is near perfect, but you made one fatal mistake," Shen Liufei said. Then, he continued after a few seconds of pause, "You killed the wrong person."

"What do you mean?" The haze inside Li Rui's eyes vanished; his expression grew a little darker, yet he maintained his soft smile and faced Shen Liufei head-on; even if it was psychologically exhausting, he didn't dare relax before the man.

“You killed the wrong person. Perhaps Cong Zhiming deserved to die, but not Cong Ying.” Shen Liufei simply placed the copy of *The Brink of Light and Dark* before Li Rui once again with an expressionless face. “You should take a look at this book.”

“You were certainly my idol in the past, but not anymore.” Li Rui opened the book and quickly scanned a page inside before tossing the signed copy and its message aside.

“You really should take a good look at it.” Shen Liufei spoke cordially, but there was clearly no room for negotiation.

Li Rui didn’t understand. He only opened the book again in suspicion as he read the message written inside. Suddenly, his face grew pale. Cold sweat formed and rolled from his forehead; even his hand holding the pages of the book began to shake.

“What did you see?” Shen Liufei asked.

Li Rui didn’t respond. He only buried his head inside the book as though he wanted to shove himself through those pages. He began to shake; a strange, almost tragic and painful but also incomprehensible noise burst from his throat.

“This...” After a long while, he finally spoke up in a shaky voice, “This isn’t your writing...”

He had seen the explicit handwritten love notes from the cards inside the roses Cong Ying had received. All the cards were signed by one Shen Liufei, the man threatening his ego.

“What about those pictures? I’ve seen photos of her in skimpy outfits at clubs all over other men. She’s nothing but a slut!” Li Rui howled and was out of control. “I even decided to give up on my father’s revenge for her, but the ungrateful bitch betrayed me!”

“This is a written copy of Lang Li’s verbal confession.” Shen Liufei handed a pile of papers to him. “This is technically against the rules, but I feel you really need to take a look at this yourself.”

With this confession, the rumors were all proven false. The sweetness of love and betrayal in the past struck his heart; Li Rui laughed and cried. “I didn’t kill the wrong person! Cong Zhiming killed my father! When he first started his business, he didn’t have enough funds and had to borrow a huge sum from my father. My father loved to help others and could never say no to a request from his old friends, but nobody was willing to help him when he was in a pinch! Our family was already having a difficult time back then. Those loan sharks came knocking on our door every other day. My mother insulted my father so often, she made herself sick from anger, but my father never told my mother that Cong Zhiming never repaid him. With her temper, he said she would definitely go to the Cong family and blow up in their faces.

Old Cong's wife was pregnant at the time and not very healthy, so he worried stirring up trouble would also affect her. He even said doing business was tough, and he would talk to Old Cong soon. He believed the man would understand our family's situation and repay us. My father showed me the loan contract before he left the house, but after that incident, Cong Zhiming told the police my father was there to borrow money and committed suicide because he refused."

Eyes bloodshot and clearly feeling pained, Li Rui questioned, "How could my father commit suicide?! He spent his whole life helping others only to be accused of committing insurance fraud after his death!"

The Gateway to All Marvels said, "A respectable opponent will not lose his composure after defeat." Yet this witty, calculating man and strategic player, who proved to be a skillful murderer, had never faced defeat, nor was he good at handling loss. Facing Xie Lanshan earlier chipped away a corner of his confidence. Now, with Shen Liufei exposing the truth, everything he believed in suddenly broke down. On the brink of madness and chaos, Li Rui couldn't help but repeat the same phrase, "I don't believe this! Like father, like daughter. The whole family is evil and deserves to go to hell!"

Standing, Shen Liufei looked down at him from above. His expression remained cold, and the emotion in his eyes was either pity or disdain.

"Don't think you can make me turn myself in so easily! These are all fake—they're all fake!" A grimace appeared on Li Rui's face. Almost immediately after, another form of madness appeared. "Mr. Shen, I passed by your house and discovered a secret of yours. I know who is important to you."

Shen Liufei frowned slightly; he really hadn't been hallucinating. Someone had been watching him from the dark.

"Have you not considered why I told you to turn off your phone?" Li Rui pulled out a greasy wrench from his pocket.

Shen Liufei clenched his hand into a fist, and his frown grew deeper. A sense of foreboding filled his heart.

"I made a call before I entered the house. I called Officer Xie to tell him I will kill you to silence you. Now that he can't get a hold of you, I'm sure he is looking all over the city for you right now in his car." Li Rui cackled. "But what can he do? His brakes are gone."

(vii)

At a sharp turn downhill, Xie Lanshan discovered the brake malfunction.

He had sped up to 134 kph on a highway with a speed limit of 80. Though he was worried what would happen, thankfully, it wasn't rush hour, so the roads weren't too crowded. As he cursed himself for being too careless, Xie

Lanshan quickly calmed himself down, attempting to shift gears to slow down.

He was relatively calm, but this situation was out of the driver's control. Two cars, a large sedan and a sports car, appeared in front of him, blocking off his open lane. Both vehicles drove as if racing on tracks, staying very close to each other without outrunning one another.

The driver of the sports car was known for his stubbornness and wanted to tease the broken sedan speeding up behind him. He didn't think the driver would tailgate his sports car, so he purposely snaked in front of Xie Lanshan to slow the cars down behind him.

Xie Lanshan wasn't in control. He turned on his signal lights and honked at the car in front to make way. The sports car only joyfully honked back without changing his pace. He even gave the middle finger to Xie Lanshan behind him.

"Fuck you!" Xie Lanshan cursed out loud and placed the police lights above his car, then turned on the siren.

The sedan driver slowly turned to the side in an attempt to make way. The sports car did as well, but anxiety overtook him, and he began to swivel in panic.

The three vehicles were getting closer and closer, making the situation more dangerous by the second. Xie Lanshan stopped shifting gears and instead sped up, forcing himself in between the two vehicles in front. The left side of the car lifted slightly as he shoved his way between the two lanes.

Somehow, he avoided a destructive collision, but his car was still scratched up and leaning on its right side. The speeding car's wheels scraped the ground, sending up sparks on the highway.

Xie Lanshan was covered in cold sweat. He'd nearly been squished into a flesh sandwich by the two other vehicles.

The collision and grinding slowed his speed at the cost of a flat tire. Thankfully, it was only the back tire. The car was still shaking from the shock, but thanks to Xie Lanshan's careful driving, the vehicle finally stabilized. His car still had not stopped, however.

Then Shen Liufei's call came in.

The two men, one driving a car, another on a motorbike, connected through wireless earbuds. Both let out a long sigh of relief as they heard each other's voice.

Thank goodness you're okay.

"You fool. I'm not sure if I should scold you for being too careless or too gullible." On this rare occasion, Shen Liufei showed perceptible emotions. He had always been like an unmoving, frigid mountain in the past no matter what happened, but his voice was distant and chiding this time. The situation wasn't entirely Xie Lanshan's fault, however; these types of brake malfunctions were

hard to detect. They were imperceptible until the oil was depleted and the pressure pedal lost functionality.

"Ah yes, my caring and loving cousin is panicking for me." He was the one who always called others foolish. He couldn't possibly accept the title himself now. Since he'd escaped a dangerous situation, Xie Lanshan was in a good mood and didn't bother arguing. Instead, he changed the topic. "Also, I recorded that bastard earlier."

"I've already called the police. Li Rui neither made any excuses nor ran away. I'm guessing he has broken down already because he mistakenly killed the person he loved most." The case was considered settled, and Xie Lanshan seemed to have escaped injury. "If you have any last words, Officer Xie, I'm all ears."

"No last words from me, but I do have an idea," Xie Lanshan said without any hint of shame, clearly wanting to take advantage of the situation. "My car's pretty beat. You should come pick me up."

"Officer Xie, please get a better car. At least one with electric brakes." Still, Shen Liufei didn't refuse. "Tell me your location right now."

Xie Lanshan took a quick glance at the live traffic and gave a location.

"I can probably park there." In theory, the best way to stop or decelerate an out-of-control vehicle was to drive up a hill. However, in order to avoid causing multiple traffic jams, Xie Lanshan had no choice but to take a highway exit.

He kept the police siren up, clearing his path. Once he began driving downhill, the speed of the car picked up again. The call with Shen Liufei was still on, though neither party had spoken since they'd gotten on the road. Xie Lanshan's focus was on driving; he took his foot off the gas pedal and carefully manually shifted gears to slow down. Though the car trembled, he would be able to stop safely very soon on the smooth road.

Before the car made its way down beneath the bridge, a group of kids came into view. They were kindergarteners out on a spring field trip and waiting to cross the street with their teacher.

The boys played with little pinwheels while the girls wore their straw hats. Each child was like a blooming flower in spring with their pinkish and round cheeks as they chatted excitedly among themselves like little chicks. As they heard the police siren and saw the car heading in their direction, the teacher screamed. The children then followed in the cries; some turned and ran, only to trip, while others froze on the spot, crying in panic.

If they were adults who knew how to stay away from danger, it would not have been an issue, yet these were five- and six-year-olds. The scene exploded out of control.

At that moment, Shen Liufei appeared from the other side of the street like a black bullet, speeding in Xie Lanshan's direction.

The car was still on the neck of the exit, but Xie Lanshan couldn't stop speeding down the hill. In the face of these young children, he turned to quickly analyze the road ahead, yanking the steering wheel without hesitation to maneuver the car away from the kids.

The car crashed into a thick cement pole, flew up from the impact, and fell off the bridge.

"Hey, Shen Liufei." The car turned in midair like a raft overturned by a giant ocean wave. Smiling, Xie Lanshan held tightly on to the steering wheel. "I feel like I've seen you somewhere before."

As the car floated in midair, not a breeze passed by, nor any birds; time seemed to have skipped a beat. The white clouds in the sky swam like fishes in the ocean, then a golden ray of light shone into his eyes. The vehicle crashed to the cement road with a horrific noise.

In the instant he hit his head, he didn't feel pain. Instead, the light around him grew brighter, and Xie Lanshan once again saw the woman in his dreams. This time, under the blinding white light, he finally saw the face of the woman dressed in white—Cong Ying.

Old Friend

The car had been destroyed, and the man inside lost consciousness. Fortunately, the main structure of the vehicle withstood the horrible crash, which, through some lucky accident and despite external bleeding and damage to his lungs, Xie Lanshan had escaped without fatal injuries. He had the airbags and seat belt to thank for that. Though he hadn't needed open-brain surgery, he was put on a respirator. After four days, he finally woke.

The first thing he saw was a woman in white arranging a vase of white lilies. At first, his eyes couldn't handle the bright light. He still saw the face of that woman in his dreams. Xie Lanshan was taken aback as he attempted to sit up. "You're..."

The woman by the window turned around—Song Qilian.

No nurses were present in the hospital room; she had been taking care of him the last few days.

She replaced the withered lilies inside the vase with fresh ones and carefully arranged them in an elegant manner. After seeing he had finally woken up, she poured a cup of water for Xie Lanshan.

"Sorry." Xie Lanshan took the cup. "You didn't need to take care of me."

"Don't be," Song Qilian said. The few words out of her mouth sounded dignified and modest in her charming voice, as if she was reciting poetry. She gave Xie Lanshan a deep look and thanked him sincerely. "My son was among the children you saved."

Thanks to Xie Lanshan's self-sacrifice, none of the children on the field trip were hurt. The biggest casualty had been a little boy's pants after he'd tripped during the chaos and peed himself in shock.

"Thank you for saving my son." Song Qilian leaned in and gave Xie Lanshan a gentle embrace. "Thank you."

He hadn't felt the soft and gentle touch of a woman in a while. On instinct, Xie Lanshan tensed; his heart began to race faster than usual. That slight change of emotion was almost unnoticeable—like a pebble falling into a large body of still water and merely splashing small droplets.

Unwilling to let the man go, Song Qilian closed her eyes and buried her face into his neck.

"There's no need to thank me." Xie Lanshan lifted his hand, attempting to return the embrace but stopping himself, realizing it might not be proper. After

a few moments of pondering, he resorted to giving Song Qilian a courteous pat on the back. “It’s just like how we were ten years ago; I’m still willing to give my life to protect you at any moment.”

The door to the hospital room opened, and a man walked in. “Sorry for interrupting.”

Hearing the voice of a third person, Song Qilian quickly let go of Xie Lanshan and discreetly wiped the tears from the corner of her eyes. She turned to glance at the man but said to Xie Lanshan, “Captain Sui visited yesterday as well while you were still asleep. It’s been a while since you two have seen each other. I’ll leave you two to talk.”

Song Qilian took the withered lilies and walked past the man, leaving the room to the patient and his new visitor.

He was handsome. Unlike the hot-headed Tao Longyue and the cold and distant Shen Liufei, this man was warm and amiable, despite giving off an air of authority. An alluring and soft smile hung on his face.

Tears welled up in Xie Lanshan’s eyes as he looked up. His whole body was still in pain. His stomach churned, his lungs burned, and all of his bones seemed on the brink of shattering, yet he still forced himself to sit upright and respectfully called out, “Captain.”

Nodding, the man gave him a grin. “It’s been a while, a-Lan.”

Sui Hong was the vice-unit captain of the antidrug department of the municipal bureau. He had selected Xie Lanshan out of the thousands of students in the police academy at first glance to work for the antidrug forces.

Many leaders from the public security forces had inspected the police academy in the past; Xie Lanshan remembered seeing a handful. All of these leaders fell into two distinct categories: one type steadily made their way up the ranks by working on the front lines for many years and developed a unique and intimidating demeanor from dealing with criminals. The other came from political backgrounds and often were transferred from other units, so they naturally looked down on others from a pedestal.

Both types of leaders made visits to the academy and earned themselves a tough impression on the students. Only Sui Hong displayed kindness and care, making him stand out amongst the hard-boiled officials.

That day at the police academy, Xie Lanshan had sat beneath a tree carving a little wooden figure with a knife.

Under the same tree were a few other young men around the same age playfully brawling and releasing their youthful energy through physical combat.

A few people approached from afar—another group of officials, but unlike normal visits, the group didn’t announce their arrival. Xie Lanshan lifted his head to catch a glimpse of them—just one glance—and the sunlight peeking

through the leaves of the tree above his head blurred his vision.

A tall man stood straight as a metal rod. His natural light brown hair framed his clean and fair face—a stark contrast to the fossils around him. Xie Lanshan had never seen a man with such a unique presence.

A proud bird rested on the tree above Xie Lanshan's head, singing to the skies. At that moment, a peculiar gust sent the bird away. The poor animal flew off in a hurry.

The wind blew harsher, shaking the tree branches; a handful of leaves and worms dropped to the ground.

As the falling insects and leaves hit the boys brawling under the tree, they cursed in frustration and when they stomped on the bugs, the insect bodies cracked like the small firecrackers children played with.

It was both grotesque and fun; the boys had found new entertainment.

A little caterpillar also fell onto Xie Lanshan's shoulder. He didn't join the other boys' festivities. He simply placed the knife in his hand down, picked up the caterpillar, then carefully placed it in the flower field behind him on the moist ground.

Then, he took back his knife and resumed his work on his carving without looking at anyone else.

This act surprised Sui Hong, who asked a teacher from the academy beside him, "What's the name of that boy?"

"Xie Lanshan." Despite the many students there, the teacher seemed to know which individual Sui Hong meant. "He looks to be quite a character."

"As long as he's not just a pretty face." Sui Hong laughed; the boy certainly had vitality.

"He's definitely not delicate. He has a good foundation for investigation and procedural abilities. On top of that, his physicals are top-notch. If he has any shortcomings, it's that he doesn't talk very much or interact with others, even during break time. He likes to spend his time carving wood like a carpenter instead of acting like a future police officer."

"A man of action and few words then. The public security department is lacking new recruits like this." Sui Hong's interest in this young man was piqued. Sui Hong was there to select future officers that day. To put it more bluntly, he was looking for a few candidates to work as undercover antidrug police in order to infiltrate the Golden Triangle. Sui Hong had a good eye for people and Xie Lanshan immediately caught it. He was convinced this naturally cold, quiet, and distant young man was an unpolished diamond. "Can he fight?"

"Of course." The teacher nodded. "This kid's mixed martial arts prowess is on par with professional UFC fighters."

“He’s that good?” Sui Hong laughed. “Arrange a match for me so I can have a look for myself. Let him fight with the men I brought over.”

The best martial artists in the municipal bureau were real professionals. Xie Lanshan was merely a newly enrolled student, so naturally the teacher’s compliments were a bit of an exaggeration, but Xie Lanshan’s grit made a lasting impression on Sui Hong regardless. The young man had been knocked down time and time again, yet he would always stand back up and never backed down, even when he was covered in blood. The gentle and demure young man’s tough soul refused to admit defeat and showed he was not afraid of death.

The fighter from the municipal bureau practically carried Xie Lanshan over his shoulder and tossed the boy out, but Xie Lanshan reacted quickly. He locked his arms around his opponent’s neck and dragged the more experienced man down with him.

The two put pressure on each other’s joints, attempting to force the other to give in. They fell into a stalemate for about five minutes until the professional began to cry out in pain. Xie Lanshan remained silent.

“That’s enough.” Sui Hong called off the match.

Xie Lanshan’s face was pale and one of his shoulders drooped unnaturally. Large drops of cold sweat rolled down from the young man’s forehead. Sui Hong asked, “Is it dislocated?”

Biting down on his lip, Xie Lanshan made a small sound of acknowledgment.

Sui Hong skillfully turned Xie Lanshan’s shoulder around to shove it back into place.

“Work hard for another two years.” Sui Hong gave a reaffirming pat on Xie Lanshan’s back right before he left. “Your country needs you.”

(ii)

Xie Lanshan trained himself as asked, and Sui Hong also fulfilled his end of the promise, greeting him upon graduation. Then he assigned a seemingly impossible mission to the young officer: go undercover in the Golden Triangle and capture the boss of the largest armed drug-dealing organization in East Asia, Mu Kun.

To make his story more believable, Xie Lanshan voluntarily served in jail for six months. He managed to hit up a small drug lord and successfully opened the first door into the Golden Triangle.

An investigator at heart, Xie Lanshan was well aware of the dangers ahead of him down the path of illegal drug dealing. To completely cut off the trade route in Asia, he would need to make his way to Mu Kun and destroy the

source of supplies without wasting any time—the operation could not wait.

But he hadn't expected the girl he kept in his heart also could not wait. During his second year undercover, he learned of Song Qilian's engagement.

For the first time since the operation, Xie Lanshan acted on his own. He traveled over two thousand kilometers from Yunnan back to Hanhai.

He was still one step too late.

The wedding took place at a luxurious five-star hotel with a glamorous setup. The groom was the son of the municipal bureau's branch chief, Liu Mingfang. Chief Liu's son hadn't followed his father's footsteps into public security and instead made a name for himself in finance as a young and successful investor.

Throughout the entire ceremony, Song Qilian's mother could not contain her joy. She knew who her daughter's heart truly belonged to, but she didn't mind this ending. Aside from not being as handsome, Liu Mingfang excelled in every other aspect. He had a rich family background, a stable career, and a father who led the public security department. How could Xie Lanshan compare? The young man was single and had no family; he also lived alone and was a source of trouble. Indeed, though he had been released from prison, he had no other assets.

Standing beside the proud and delighted parents was a melancholy bride.

Xie Lanshan didn't enter the hotel. He simply hung around the reception area.

The bridesmaid and best man were all friends of the groom and didn't know Xie Lanshan. The bridesmaid had a wide face with a brilliant grin like a ripe peach, and even her voice was like the sweet juice of the fruit. "You can give the red envelopes to me. I'll keep them for the bride and groom."

"Please... give this to Miss Song Qilian for me." Instead of an envelope, Xie Lanshan had only brought a wooden figure a little bigger than his own hand. He shoved the figure into the hands of the bridesmaid and left without another word.

Upon closer inspection, the bridesmaid screeched in horror. Spots of blood covered the wooden figure like unevenly brushed red paint. She didn't know the present had been hand carved by Xie Lanshan over a sleepless night. The knife had cut into his flesh countless times during the process, but the man seemed not to have noticed.

A bloody wooden figure of a human head sounded like an inappropriate wedding gift, but the bridesmaid took another closer look. The craftsmanship was spectacular, and the subject of the carving was the bride.

As he was acquainted with the newlyweds, Sui Hong was naturally invited to the wedding. He saw Xie Lanshan quickly leave the hotel from the corner of his eyes. The officer quietly excused himself from the main hall, then called

a secret number to contact his subordinate.

They decided to meet on the top of a skyscraper. Xie Lanshan arrived early and stood silently by the edge of the rooftop until nightfall arrived. The evening breeze began to blow through his clothes.

He clenched his injured hand into a fist; fresh blood rolled down between the gaps of his fingers.

Sui Hong walked up to him from behind.

Xie Lanshan turned his head at the sound of footsteps. Once his eyes met those of his boss, the tears he'd suppressed over the years finally overflowed. "Captain, I can't do this..."

Without a word, Sui Hong strolled beside him. He slid an arm around the young man's shoulder and faced the urban landscape of the city at night.

The lucky day of the month was a popular time for weddings between young couples, and it also was the time for the city's annual flower parade. The main streets in the city had already filled with spectators; the stages and performances on the sidewalks attracted hundreds of thousands of people. The cheers of the crowd served as encouragement for the performers, creating a lively scene. From Xie Lanshan's view, countless human heads gathered down below like ants on the ground.

After a long while, Sui Hong finally spoke. "If you inject heroin directly into your veins twice a day at one gram per injection, developing substance addiction takes three days at most. If you take the drug by mouth, it only takes one try. Two grams down your stomach can kill you immediately. With the intel you've managed to send back to us over the past year, your colleagues arrested seven drug dealers attempting to cross the border, intercepting 966 kilograms of pure heroin, 474 grams of crystal meth, and 122 packs of powder meth. Have you thought about that before? Imagine how horrific it would be if these drugs successfully made their way into our country."

On the dot, the few landmark buildings in Hanhai City lit up simultaneously, their matching LEDs shining through the night. The parade officially began, and the crowd of spectators exploded in thunderous applause.

Sui Hong smiled. "Look, it's a world of peace and prosperity."

Xie Lanshan didn't respond. He stood on the high ground and watched the vibrant city life at night for a long while. A sudden epiphany came to him: the happiness and pain of a single person truly was minuscule. Yes, this was a world of peace and prosperity where the future generations could have a happy upbringing and live a long, peaceful life.

It was like fresh water had been poured on his head, clearing his mind. Xie Lanshan now understood as he gazed at the glistening city. The worries in his mind vanished, and a faint smile appeared on his face.

He swung his jacket over his shoulder, then turned and walked away.

Sui Hong called to him from behind. “Are you just going to leave me like this?”

Xie Lanshan tilted his head, then gave his boss an impish grin. “Yo, sir, I need to head back to work.”

“Speak properly. Don’t give me that thug talk you learned from the movies.” Despite the scolding, Sui Hong laughed. “A-Lan, I’ll wait for you to return. You’re a good cop and my best subordinate.”

Now, inside the ICU, Sui Hong still remained that kind and respectful leader from many years ago. He turned to Xie Lanshan and smiled. “I feel like I see news about you virtually every day on the internet ever since you switched to the investigation unit. Last time was your one-man sharpshooter performance, now you’re reenacting a real-life Fast and Furious on the highway. What’s up with that? Tired of being a cop now and want to become an influencer instead?”

Xie Lanshan had only finally regained some vestige of a good reputation. He took out his phone. The headlines portrayed him as an officer who sacrificed himself in the midst of danger, glorifying him like a hero who had taken down a fortress on his own. Xie Lanshan found these articles quite entertaining and couldn’t hide his amusement, even in the face of his former boss.

Sui Hong was quite concerned about his former subordinate’s situation. “Are you doing all right in the new department?”

“Of course, I have quite the relationship with my superiors. They point in a direction, and I go. I’d even direct traffic if they asked me to. Investigating criminal cases is nothing.”

Sniffing out the saltiness, Sui Hong laughed. “Still mad?”

Xie Lanshan pondered the question seriously before lifting the corner of his lips in response. “I’m not, really.”

The two chatted a little longer. Sui Hong asked about Xie Lanshan’s current situation and mentioned some antidrug operations in his department as well. The armed organizations within the Golden Triangle had recently been getting back on their feet, but rebuilding their drug trade network would be exceedingly difficult for the dealers.

“All right, I’ll leave you alone now. Take care and rest up.” When a nurse walked in to administer new medicine, Sui Hong walked out of the hospital room. He stopped by the door and turned his head. “You’ll always be a member of my team and my best subordinate.”

Though the words were familiar, times had changed; Xie Lanshan felt an unexplainable soreness in his throat. Unable to say a proper farewell, he could only give Sui Hong a respectful salute.

Song Qilian was still waiting out in the hallway. The two exchanged a quick glance. Now that Xie Lanshan wasn't around, Song Qilian no longer acted polite; the light in her eyes dimmed as she lowered her head, ready to walk away. This man had taken Xie Lanshan out of her life and thus changed her future. He had once explained the obligations and role of a cop to her, the loyalty and trust they had to give as investigators. She understood but couldn't forgive.

Song Qilian wanted to leave, but Sui Hong was of a different mind. He called out her name from behind. "Qilian, I want to speak to you."

He detailed Xie Lanshan's six years of experience undercover; those days when his shoulders carried a weight day and night as the young man had danced with blades and bullets. "He couldn't save the person he wanted to and had to witness his comrades around him sacrifice their lives for his sake. He's shouldered too much outside pressure, misunderstanding, and pain. I'm very concerned about his psychological well-being."

"What can I do?" Song Qilian's heart bled but she was afraid to empathize with the suffering the man must have gone through. The official standards for therapy and mental rehabilitation in China clearly prohibited the therapist and patient from maintaining any sort of relationship beyond that of a service provider and client. In other words, friends and families could not treat one another. Though it wasn't a hard rule, Sui Hong's arrangement skirted the issue.

"Don't handle him like a patient and don't actually treat him. Just interact with him as the friend you've known since you were twelve; let him open up, console him, and support him," Sui Hong told Song Qilian. "If he faces any challenges in the future, or anything strange comes up, please get in touch with me."

The following two weeks, Xie Lanshan remained in the ICU. Captain Tao made a quick visit before he ran back off to close the last homicide case and arrange more dates with his crush; he never showed up again. Xie Lanshan was bored out of his mind. He had no choice but to spend his free time watching dramas on his phone. He picked a mystery the media had praised as unique and unexpected but guessed the true culprit five minutes into the first episode. He tried three more before deciding it no longer captured his interest.

Now his only other entertainment was to play cards with the young and cute nurses in the hospital.

Over the last few days, Xie Lanshan's hair had grown out a bit. He had yet to fully recover from the blood clot in his head, making it difficult to style or cut his hair in the hospital. He asked a nurse for a hair tie and tied it into a small ponytail.

Xie Lanshan was a master at playing cards and had relatively decent luck, so he almost never lost. The winner got to punish the losers, so he let the girls choose whether to get a little pinch or give him a kiss.

"How did you win again?!"

The smattering of lipstick marks on Xie Lanshan's face left no room for another. The losing nurse fell into a dilemma, as she was unwilling to let the man pinch her.

"It's fine—if you're scared of pain, you can kiss here." Xie Lanshan lifted his chin at the young woman and pressed a finger to his lips.

The two other nurses egged them on. Her face burning, the nurse shook her head and refused.

"You should know I pinch hard." Xie Lanshan smiled sweetly as he threatened the young woman.

That did scare the nurse. She finally lifted her head up and leaned in toward the man.

This was the scene that greeted Shen Liufei as he stepped into the ICU.

(iii)

Upon hearing the door open, Xie Lanshan looked up and smiled. "Hey there, cuz."

He finally remembered his face was covered in loving pecks from the girls and wiped them off.

A faint light glinted in Shen Liufei's eyes, which widened slightly. The little ponytail on Xie Lanshan's head seemed to suddenly captivate him when he walked over, but his expression quickly recovered its usual coolness.

After transferring out of the ICU, Xie Lanshan was moved into a private hospital room that cost three thousand yuan a day. Of course, he could not afford this with his measly service salary from the government, nor could he expect the municipal bureau to reimburse him. The nurses had told him the person who'd paid for all his expenses was one Shen Liufei.

They really believed Shen Liufei was the patient's cousin. Though, strangely, this cousin looked quite young; if Xie Lanshan looked to be in his late twenties, Shen Liufei seemed more like an undergraduate student in his early twenties despite his mature air.

"You look to be in good spirits. I'm assuming you're feeling better now?" As Shen Liufei walked toward the patient, the nurses stood up, looking slightly ashamed they were caught slacking off during work hours by a visitor.

"Not bad." Xie Lanshan leaned back slightly and stretched his arms like a lazy cat until he saw the nurse who lost also standing up. Perking up his lips lightly, the man tapped a finger to say soundlessly: *you owe me one*.

Holding in her chuckle, the nurse ran off with a red face. For a nurse like her, who was on-call twenty-four hours a day during her shift and ready to take care of any patient requests, it was all busy work. Though she took a liking to Xie Lanshan's room because the man was easygoing and didn't bother her as much as other patients.

"Shen—"

Before the man could finish his sentence, Shen Liufei was already standing in front of Xie Lanshan, a finger gently touching the latter's face.

A spark of shock shot down Xie Lanshan's spine as the finger caressed his cheekbone His face also burned at the touch.

Tao Longyue mentioned that, shortly after he was knocked out following the car crash, his breathing had stopped temporarily. Shen Liufei performed CPR, allowing him to last until the ambulance came.

How was he supposed to repay this perfectly timed kindness that had come like a torrential downpour during a drought? Xie Lanshan stared at Shen Liufei, instinctively focused on the latter's lips as his mind raced with inappropriate thoughts. On the other hand, Shen Liufei was rather calm; his gaze lowered slightly despite his proper demeanor and his long fingers traced across Xie Lanshan's pinkish lips. His hand moved past the chin and onto the man's cheek, wiping off a bright red lipstick mark he missed earlier.

"So, uh, I really don't think I can scrounge up the money I owe you." Quietly calculating the cost of his two-week stay in the hospital so far, Xie Lanshan gave his visitor a dumb grin. "If you don't mind giving me two more days here, I can pay you back with my body."

Shen Liufei's lips curled. His fingers pinched Xie Lanshan's chin, softly studying the officer. "Do you think you're worth that much?"

"Of course. How am I not? Didn't you see the news is saying I'm the most beautiful and handsomest cop in all of China?" People were forgetful beings. The last time the man made the headlines, he was the target of slander and flaming. This time, his self-sacrifice turned those same comments into songs of praise for a hero overnight. Said hero wasn't interested in showing off, but the urge to rub his gallant deed in Shen Liufei's face was very strong. "You were at the scene of the accident. You should've seen my great driving skills firsthand. See how cool I was when I flew over the bridge?"

"No, I didn't." Shen Liufei didn't hesitate to deny it. "I only saw a man half-dead from the crash gushing blood from his head and seizing from the brain damage—not to mention wetting his pants—"

The three nurses near the door giggled.

"Ahem," Xie Lanshan quickly cleared his throat to interrupt the indecent images in their heads. "So how's it going with Li Rui's case?"

“He’s done for. He no longer has the spirit to fight against the investigators.”

The case had finally settled at this point. The two men only had time to exchange a few words before Tao Longyue walked into the room as well. He didn’t come without a gift, of course, and brought an entire bag of apples and pears. The captain asked for a fruit knife from the nurses and offered to personally cut the bounty for his old friend, but a nurse instead began to nag him. “It’s bad luck to bring apples and unripe pears to the hospital. ‘Apple’ in Chinese is a homophone for ‘death by illness,’ and ‘unripe pear’ for ‘leaving the mortal world.’ Don’t bring those things in.”

“Is that true?” Tao Longyue looked at Xie Lanshan. His heart skipped as he recalled his best friend during the accident, but he insisted on putting up a strong front. “This guy’s tough. He didn’t even die from a fall over the bridge. Ya think he’d die from a superstition?”

He saw Shen Liufei from the corner of his eye. “Mr. Shen, thank you for saving a-Lan’s life.”

“No need to thank me,” Shen Liufei answered solemnly. “I’m just doing my part.”

On the day of the accident, Tao Longyue was informed of Xie Lanshan’s crash and immediately rushed to the hospital. He thought he was fast, but he found Shen Liufei already there, sitting in the plastic chairs commonly found in hospitals with his eyes closed and head leaned back against the wall behind him. Bloodstains marred his face, hands, hair, and clothes.

When Tao Longyue had asked about Xie Lanshan’s situation. Shen Liufei slowly opened his eyes as if he had heard those words, though he didn’t respond. Tao Longyue had never seen such fatigue. Even the hint of melancholy almost made him seem like the real victim of the crash.

The captain later learned from a nurse at the scene that Xie Lanshan was unusually calm when he was carried into the hospital. If not for the stream of fresh blood flowing out of his ears, the man could have simply been sleeping.

Tao Longyue requested to stay the night after the surgery. Xie Lanshan’s mother was at a psych ward, and the man had no other relatives around. Captain Tao was worried the nurses were too busy to care for the patient and brought his case files into the ICU. He told Shen Liufei, “You haven’t slept for the last two days already. Get some rest and I’ll take care of a-Lan.”

Shen Liufei looked at Tao Longyue and responded cordially but firmly, “No need. I can handle it.”

Shen Liufei’s strange attitude stunned Tao Longyue at the time, and he left the hospital without another word. Until he recalled the whole incident, it didn’t occur to him how ridiculous it sounded. Shen Liufei, someone who had known Xie Lanshan for less than a month, had treated him like the outsider.

But as soon as Xie Lanshan's condition stabilized, Shen Liufei disappeared. The artist requested a few days off. Rumors had it he flew back to the States.

Tao Longyue wasn't there simply to pay a visit to his injured friend. He instinctively lit a cigarette. Before he could even inhale, the sharp-eyed nurse scolded him harshly and reminded him smoking was banned inside the hospital room.

"Oh, you little bratty nurse! You don't understand how boring it is to chat about a case without a smoke!" Tao Longyue frantically extinguished the cigarette. He pulled out an apple from the bag, wiped it on his clothes, and bit into the fruit.

"Chat about the case?" Xie Lanshan asked, "Is there more?"

"It's not about Li Rui. It's Lang Li." Tao Longyue's expression grew grave. "Lang Li is dead. She was murdered while on a vacation by herself in Laos."

"Lang Li just died like that?" Xie Lanshan was puzzled. "How did she die in Laos? Wasn't she supposed to be under criminal detention?"

"Her case was excused, so she was let out early."

Shen Liufei frowned. "Arson is a serious crime under the law. How can the department let her go so easily?"

Tao Longyue sighed. "Chief Liu personally ordered to let her go, saying ultimately the damage wasn't severe, and we'd only lost some hardware, so it wasn't enough to open a completely new case."

Xie Lanshan didn't respond, seemingly displeased with Liu Yanbo's decision on the matter.

"We've contacted the police over in Laos already, and they sent some info over. They've already caught the killer—a mentally disabled person. Here." Tao Longyue handed over an envelope containing detailed photos and witness accounts of the murder. Xie Lanshan studied the photos carefully and passed them on to Shen Liufei one by one as he finished.

Lang Li's body was stripped naked; her throat had a bloody, deep cut.

"Even though we have some jurisdiction, it's troublesome to conduct investigations on our end. Those police officers in Laos also know it's just procedure and won't give too many details," Tao Longyue said. "I guess this is what you call delayed justice; Lang Li provoked Li Rui into killing Cong Ying's entire family, and now she's paying her price as well."

Shen Liufei didn't voice his opinion on the matter, and Xie Lanshan also remained silent. Judging from the information in the files, the investigators in Laos appeared to be sharp and swift. They arrested the culprit without any delay, yet the whole idea of karma still sounded too much like a convenient coincidence—even if it was superstition.

Another call from his subordinate interrupted Captain Tao before he could finish eating his apple, and he had to leave. Right before stepping out, he

turned and warned Xie Lanshan, “Don’t forget to get a haircut after you get out of the hospital. If my old man sees you like this, he’s going to make you write a self-reflection report!”

“Your Captain Tao is too careless.” Shen Liufei picked up a fallen photo between two fingers and studied it. His eyebrows furrowed, and he handed it to Xie Lanshan.

Tao Longyue was long gone with the file, but he’d dropped a photo of Lang Li’s corpse in the room. Xie Lanshan didn’t notice this photo earlier but was now shocked as he finally saw the image.

In the photo, a black tattoo marked Lang Li’s lower abdomen right below her navel and just above her private parts. It appeared to be a strange mystical symbol connected to two flowery English letters—MK.

(iv)

To Xie Lanshan, the days he was undercover around Mu Kun were like a deserted grass field occupied by venomous snakes. He was reluctant to search through his memories and recall those horrific times, yet the tattoo on Lang Li’s corpse pulled his mind into the depths of that very field.

Mu Kun was the leader of the largest armed drug-dealing organization within the Golden Triangle, but he was not the *only* one. The local military units in Myanmar and Laos had no power against them as the land transformed into a hub of chaos. Mu Kun’s organization was mostly based in Myanmar; in Laos, another drug lord by the name of Guan Nuoqin also had a handful of private armed forces. He was Mu Kun’s rival.

In the past, Mu Kun had made a careless mistake. Greed overtook him. To conquer Nuoqin’s territory, the drug lord looked into opening a market of his drugs in the US. He was convinced that he was the king among the drug lords of the Golden Triangle, but his hubris came to bite him when a close ally betrayed him. Upon returning from a large business exchange, he fell into Guan Nuoqin’s trap. A brawl between rabid dogs was fighting poison with poison. In the deep mountains, the two big drug lords of the region had battled to the death.

Mu Kun didn’t bring many people on this trip. After a violent confrontation with Nuoqin’s men, virtually all of his escorts had perished, leaving only Xie Lanshan alive. While on the run, Mu Kun injured his knee and had to rely on Xie Lanshan to escape. At least a few dozen enemies around searched for them. Gunshots echoed in the woods.

“Your legs are still fine. You can walk on your own.” Mu Kun reached for the gun he hid inside his jacket. If Xie Lanshan ran without him, he would shoot the man down from behind without hesitation.

Of course, this thought never crossed Xie Lanshan's mind. The purpose of this undercover operation wasn't to assassinate Mu Kun but to collect intel and annihilate the entire drug-dealing organization. If Mu Kun died, someone else would step up and take over, which meant the efforts he put into earning Mu Kun's trust would also be completely useless. Hence, he had never even thought about leaving Mu Kun alone to die in the mountains.

At that moment, three of Guan Nuoqin's mercenaries appeared. One held a simple handgun, while the other two carried an AK-47 each. Xie Lanshan hid the injured Mu Kun behind the bushes and disappeared to the other side, waiting to ambush the incoming enemies. He took out the knife he carried with him and held his breath, waiting for battle.

The three mercenaries approached—one of them quickly made it within Xie Lanshan's reach and kicked the bushes, suspecting someone was hiding there. The split second when the mercenary turned to call his comrades over, Xie Lanshan jumped out and attacked the man, slicing cleanly through his throat.

The sound of the commotion drew the other two to hold up their guns and fire. Xie Lanshan used the corpse as a human shield against the bullets. Then he took the corpse's gun and successfully shot down another enemy.

Two down, one to go; the bullets in the handgun ran out very quickly. Xie Lanshan swiftly charged forward, zigzagging behind the trees and down close to the ground. He waited until the enemy also ran out of bullets, then swept into action the moment before they could replenish. The young man charged forward and gave the enemy a violent headbutt. Immediately, blood covered the enemy's face, and a yellow tooth fell out of his mouth, dropping on Xie Lanshan. The two struggled on the ground, attempting to restrain each other. The enemy sat on the young man's back, using his gun to choke Xie Lanshan. As the violent and cold metal suffocated him, Xie Lanshan struggled for breath.

Crash! A clear sound rang out like the explosion of a wine bottle.

A rain of fresh blood mixed with human flesh sprayed over Xie Lanshan; the enemy above him had been shot in the head. The corpse fell; Mu Kun stood before Xie Lanshan with a gun in his left hand and a deadly, malicious expression.

"Fucker! How dare you touch my man?!" Mu Kun cursed loudly. Then he lost his balance and dropped back to the ground.

The bushes faintly rustled. Upon closer inspection, Xie Lanshan saw a cobra rear up in hostility, ready to attack at any moment. It had already bitten Mu Kun.

Xie Lanshan swiftly sliced down the snake with the knife. He settled Mu Kun comfortably and pressed his lips on the two small bites on the man's leg,

carefully sucking out the toxins.

"Why didn't you just leave me and run off on your own?" Mu Kun spoke through his heavy panting, feeling the warmth as Xie Lanshan sucked out the poison.

"You're my boss." Xie Lanshan spat out another mouthful of blood, then leaned down to untie his shoelaces. He used them to tie off Mu Kun's wound and delay the venom's circulation.

"But Gold Tooth says you're a cop. They all say you're a cop."

"If I were a cop," Xie Lanshan answered coldly and shot a look at Mu Kun, "you would've been dead already."

Mu Kun attempted to give him a small smile.

They didn't have fresh water. A small puddle on the muddy ground contained some unknown animal's feces floating on the surface—though it was indeed disgusting, it was still better than a mouthful of venom. Xie Lanshan took a small handful and rinsed his mouth.

"Try and stay as still as you can. That will delay the spread of the venom. It'd be best if we could get you to a hospital as soon as possible." He pulled Mu Kun up and wrapped the man's arm around his shoulder. "I promise I'll get you out of here."

Mu Kun was tall and fit, so Xie Lanshan struggled to slowly carry the man away.

While brawling with the last mercenary, he'd bruised his ankle on a rock. Every step was met with excruciating pain, but Xie Lanshan had no time to complain. They spent the whole day on a roller coaster of life and death. How was he going to communicate this to his higher-ups? He'd killed two people. Even if they were evil drug dealers, he still needed to report back.

They walked for a long while when Mu Kun suddenly said he needed to use the restroom. Xie Lanshan had no choice but to help with an arm around Mu Kun's shoulders and another down his pants.

The night breeze brushed through tree leaves while the liquid splashed on the ground.

After he was done, Mu Kun made another request. He was tired and wanted to rest for a while.

Perhaps the venom inside him was starting to spread through his veins. As he lay helplessly on his side, his usually handsome face turned ghostly pale and sickly. His lips were purple and he began to shiver. Xie Lanshan took off his jacket and wrapped it around Mu Kun.

Guan Nuoqin would never give up that easily. They had only escaped the violent ambush thanks to the large forest. Two meters away, Xie Lanshan kept a lookout while Mu Kun rested. As he sat, he took his tank top off and casually wiped his body and face. The injury on his forehead had already

stopped bleeding, but his whole body reeked of urine. The AK-47 had rubbed a layer of skin off Xie Lanshan's neck, so his sweat burned as it dripped into the open wound.

Perhaps because of the venom's effect, Mu Kun found himself staring blankly but obsessively at Xie Lanshan's bare back.

"You've never smiled once since I first met you." Mu Kun licked his dry and white lips, staring at Xie Lanshan. "I guess people who come out of police academies are different; are the cops in China all so deadpan?"

Xie Lanshan was carving something. He kept his gaze down. "I guess."

Mu Kun's interest was piqued—or perhaps it was more accurate to say he had always been curious about Xie Lanshan. This man never went out to party with the rest of his subordinates and allies. He didn't have many hobbies either, aside from sitting alone in his small space to carve animals out of wood chunks.

After taking a man's life, his knife seemed to have dulled. Xie Lanshan ground the blade on the rock beside his feet a few times and got back to carving.

"Who's that? Your mom? Or your girlfriend?" He'd been working on this particular piece for a while now. It still wasn't done, but Mu Kun could tell it was a woman by the shape. Xie Lanshan always looked as though he were in a daze, as if it brought up painful memories.

"Neither." Xie Lanshan recalled Song Qilian slapping his face as she wept and called him disgusting. Suddenly, something heavy in his chest sank and pained him. He lowered his gaze; his expression grew grave. "Just a friend."

"Just a friend? The kind of friend you're willing to give your life for?"

Xie Lanshan didn't respond, then gave a small sound of acknowledgment.

The corner of Mu Kun's mouth twitched. "This shoelace is getting annoying. I can feel it squeezing me. Loosen it up."

Xie Lanshan set the carving knife down and walked over.

He kneeled before Mu Kun and untied the shoelace, only to have Mu Kun pull up his chin. "You sure are pretty."

The two men faced each other, their noses almost touching. The forest's nighttime mist hovered in the air as the atmosphere around them grew moist.

"You would look better if you grew your hair out." Mu Kun squinted slightly at Xie Lanshan. The young man had a clean, beautiful jawline—a little too smooth for a man. If it wasn't for his tough and cruel demeanor, Xie Lanshan could have been a model.

A beautiful model who would look good with long hair.

After a brief and silent exchange, Xie Lanshan lowered his head and retied the shoelace above the snake bite.

Mu Kun was covered in Xie Lanshan's clothes. In a daze, he touched Xie Lanshan's firm abs. Then, as if possessed by some strange power, his finger reached inside the man's pants.

Almost instantly, Xie Lanshan grabbed tightly onto Mu Kun's hand. His eyebrows furrowed, and he panted heavily. Without a word, he tightened his grip, warning Mu Kun to take the hand away.

Mu Kun didn't have the energy to fight back, nor did he intend to. He placed his palm back on the man's abs and caressed them. "I want to leave my name on here. Just a tattoo of my initials will be enough."

Xie Lanshan's expression remained blank. "Like branding a slave?"

"If you insist on taking it that way, sure." Mu Kun laughed out loud, almost choking on his own breath. He had never been so disheveled before in his life, but he didn't seem to pay it any mind.

A sudden thought came up, a reality he needed to realize.

"Not a slave, but brothers." Mu Kun extended a hand to Xie Lanshan without warning. "We've faced life and death together."

Xie Lanshan hesitated. "Brothers" was a heavy word. He had never thought about calling a drug lord his brother in his life, nor did he ever plan on doing so.

"What, am I not good enough for you?" Mu Kun's hand was still out.

"We're brothers." Xie Lanshan also extended a hand. He had to complete his mission and earn the trust of the drug lord. "In life and death."

Turning his back to Mu Kun, Xie Lanshan walked deep into the forest until he reached a river. The other side was Mu Kun's territory, where an army of criminals waited to take vengeance against Guan Nuoqin.

"I wouldn't mind dying in your hands." Those were the last words Mu Kun said before he fell unconscious.

Perhaps this was also a trick in disguise. Swimming across a river in the middle of the night was dangerous. Mu Kun never trusted anyone and remained suspicious of Xie Lanshan, even though the young man had fought to the death to protect him. He was afraid Xie Lanshan didn't have the stamina to swim across the river and would let him drown.

But Xie Lanshan didn't think too much about it. He wanted the peaceful and prosperous world Sui Han had spoken of and nothing else. As the water of the river blended into the night sky, he swam desperately to the other side.

(v)

After being released from the hospital, the first thing Xie Lanshan wanted to do was find that woman haunting his dreams. The realistic imagery in each nightmare had felt like drawing on a blank canvas from sketch to finish, and

the car crash had been the final touch of paint unveiling the final image. He suspected he had seen this woman before but could no longer recall it, as if he had lost a piece of his memory.

Of course, he could find a lead through investigation.

Xie Lanshan asked Xiao Liang for help. After the original forensic sketch artist retired but before Shen Liufei was officially on the job, the young man had overseen this department.

Unfortunately, their efforts were in vain. After an hour of sitting in front of the computer, Xie Lanshan slapped Xiao Liang's head in anger. "You idiot, this looks nothing like her."

"C'mon, bro, computers are just machines." The program was special forensic image software developed by and for the public security department. Xiao Liang had no control over its limitations. "My lord, this vessel can't possibly replicate an exact face just based on your vague descriptions!"

Xie Lanshan still gave him a threatening glare.

Xiao Liang's quick wits saved him. "Hey, don't we have a professional now? You can go ask Shen Liufei!"

As a special advisor, Shen Liufei didn't spend a lot of time in the investigator's office during working hours. Even when he was present, his office was on a different floor. Xie Lanshan frowned and glanced at the lonely office door, pondering the possibilities of this option.

The answer was no, or at least, now was not the time.

He still couldn't trust Shen Liufei fully. Xiao Liang, an enthusiastic but naïve person, would forget about any private requests unrelated to the job within a short time, but Shen Liufei's gaze was like a burning torch scorching his skin with its blazing flames. Xie Lanshan felt uneasy sharing his strange dream and the mysterious woman haunting him.

At night, he joined Tao Longyue in overtime and visited a boxing club bar that was gaining popularity within Hanhai City in order to investigate a new case. The bar had been hosting underground boxing tournaments recently and attracting fighters from all backgrounds. Many spectators from out of town had also joined in to watch the brawls. Hence, a thorough investigation was necessary.

The two didn't plan on exposing their identities as police officers, so they dressed casually. Xie Lanshan wore a large black shirt. His hair had grown out a little more, but he didn't tie it up this time. Fortunately, these last two days, Old Tao had been out of town for a meeting, so no one was there to nag him about a haircut or writing a self-reflection report. Two people said he looked good with long hair, and judging from his own reflection, it seemed true.

The moment he stepped into the bar, flirtatious winks and whistles greeted him.

Tao Longyue's horrible scar and threatening eyes fended off all of these coquettish looks and sounds. "I received a message earlier this afternoon. A group of wandering thieves managed to sneak into our city."

"You could've left this for one of the local branches to investigate." Xie Lanshan regarded it as a mere burglary case. "Why is the homicide and violent crime unit captain paying a personal visit?"

"This isn't a normal pickpocket—it's a bandit who specializes in stealing art. Besides, I also want to check out what this famous boxing club bar is all about for myself."

His eyes glistening almost flirtatiously, Xie Lanshan laughed. "Then let's check it out together."

Tao Longyue returned a genial grin in response. "I know you've been bored out of your mind stuck in the hospital; I bet your ass has been itching for some excitement."

All of the waitresses were pretty women who wore their long hair in pigtails. Tao Longyue was surprised to spy Ding Li in the crowd and thunder of electronica. Foregoing her customary and proper uniform from the municipal bureau, Ding Li had donned a seductive miniskirt and a few blue highlights in her hair.

She turned to run away in a panic.

"What are you doing here?" Tao Longyue blocked her path, howling at the young woman. "Public service employees are not allowed to take up part-time work outside of their full-time job. Don't you know the rules?!"

"I'm not! My friend works here, and shark week started for her today, so she asked me to take over her shift. It's just for one day!" Ding Li clapped her hands together. "I'm not getting paid, so it shouldn't count as work, right?"

Still upset, Tao Longyue studied Ding Li's heavy makeup and swatted away her pigtails. "And what's up with that hair?"

"It's temporary. It'll wash out easily," Ding Li explained with a pout.

"There are temporary hair dyes?" Tao Longyue turned around to ask Xie Lanshan.

"These people don't look like they're from around here. Are they Thai?" Xie Lanshan didn't seem to be interested. His expression grew gloomy as he eyed a boxer walking past them. The boxer's upper body was exposed and he only wore a pair of red shorts. He was short, tan, and muscular in a way that emitted a dangerous aura. Aside from him, multiple people looked to be of Southeast Asian descent. Their skin was tanner than an average Chinese person's and they had larger eyes and were all around the same height. Having spent a long time in the Golden Triangle, Xie Lanshan could tell from a glance they were not locals.

“This boxing bar has been gaining popularity over these last few months, even earning sponsors for their tournaments. The prize pool grew exponentially; now winning one round can earn you at least ten thousand yuan. No wonder it attracted so many professional boxers from Thailand and Laos.” A ferocious boxer walked past them, pressing his boxing gloves together. Tao Longyue’s eyebrows furrowed. “I heard the fights are quite violent. Many contestants had to be sent to the hospital with broken bones.”

The night’s competition hadn’t even started, but the seats were already filling up. A stark contrast to the beautiful waitresses at the bar, the muscular men gathered around the ring. The venue was spacious and large, so it could host boxing matches with proper equipment, unlike a normal fight club. The location itself could almost match a professional boxing ring.

To kill time until the matches started, the DJ played loud EDM music as the audience danced like a hoard of wild party animals. Everyone on the floor moved from head to toe to the beat. It made the perfect breeding ground for drug dealing.

Xie Lanshan’s gaze cautiously scanned the crowd, only to find a face he hoped he would never have to see again—Liu Mingfang, Chief Liu Yanbo’s son.

The last time Xie Lanshan had seen him was outside of Song Qilian’s wedding. On the large poster at the reception, he’d stood next to the bride like the main character in a fairy-tale love story. His bright and large eyes complemented his handsome face, but his smile had been aggravatingly proud, as if announcing to everyone that the beautiful flower beside him had finally found her proper place.

Now, another person stood beside Liu Mingfang: the famous art collector and critic, Li Guochang. Rumor had it that his sharp tongue never missed and often shot down artists for their unrefined skills. As he aged, he grew more docile, focusing on ancient Chinese scroll art. Recently, he had been retrieving national treasures from overseas and returning to China to repatriate his findings.

Liu Mingfang happened to be working in the same industry and had a trade business for luxury collectibles. He had invited Li Guochang in the hopes of convincing the old man to put his prized collection up for auction. Li Guochang had heard about the famous boxing bar in Hanhai City and showed interest during their negotiations, so Liu Mingfang hadn’t hesitated to fulfill his guest’s request.

He hadn’t expected to run into Xie Lanshan, however.

Even though their fathers were acquainted and they’d been classmates in middle school, Liu Mingfang had always felt disdain toward Xie Lanshan, whose very existence he blamed for his failed marriage.

Thanks to his father's social connections, Liu Mingfang also knew Tao Longyue. "Oh hey, why isn't it Captain Tao from the municipal bureau. Are you enjoying your time off here with the taxes we pay?" He raised a hand to greet the captain. "Also, don't mind me butting into your business, but considering this place produces a few broken bones every night, is it even legal?" His words were blunt, and he purposely avoided Xie Lanshan.

Put on the spot, Tao Longyue felt awkward and turned to Xie Lanshan. "Uh... is it?"

As if he were reliving unwanted memories, Xie Lanshan pressed his lips together and didn't answer.

"Of course." A cold and deep man's voice rang out from behind the two officers. "Signed in 2014, the 'Guiding Opinions of the State Council's General Office on Expediting the Sports Competition and Performance Industry's Development' explicitly said the government encourages local businesses and organizations to promote community participation."

The two officers turned around and saw the man they had expected: Shen Liufei, wearing a white shirt and gold-rimmed eyeglasses. Neither of them had seen the man in his bespectacled state before; the accessory gave him an even more elegant, distant, and lethargic air in sharp contrast to the passionate and high-spirited bar.

Liu Mingfang hadn't expected such a speedy rebuttal. "Who are you?"

Shen Liufei didn't even shoot a glance at Liu Mingfang, instead turning to Li Guochang to give him a courteous bow. "Senior Li here returned an authentic Fu Baoshi in 2007, then rejected the temptation posed by many collection agencies to put Zhu Yunming's calligraphic works into auction. Instead, he donated them to the National Museum. I admire Senior Li, not only because of his ability to track down these national treasures but also for his noble heart. He resists the lure of money and shares works with the public."

"I certainly didn't expect a young man like you to know so much about ancient Chinese artwork and collections." Li Guochang nodded at Shen Liufei, appraising the younger man. Then he turned back to Liu Mingfang as if he had remembered something. "I'm definitely donating the piece, so you don't need to try and persuade me anymore."

Xie Lanshan and Tao Longyue exchanged a quick glance as they held in their laughter. Xie Lanshan was especially pleased. Shen Liufei was purposely playing games to earn the old collector's recognition, slyly beating Liu Mingfang down.

Seeing the old man's satisfaction, Liu Mingfang realized he'd wasted two hours of his time talking and took a sip of the beer in his hand in disappointment.

Shen Liufei didn't stay to listen to others' praise. As the song playing in the background ended, he turned to the DJ in the back and gestured, implying his request. The DJ quickly changed the tune to a popular tango.

Shen Liufei bowed toward Xie Lanshan and reached out a hand. "Shall we dance?"

While Xie Lanshan hesitated, Tao Longyue commented, "You? Dance? Don't you remember how many times you stepped on Song Qilian during the dance in our last year of high school?"

Unlike the US, China had no tradition of school proms. Their class representatives that year had merely decided to host their own dance event before graduation on a whim. The boys arrived with cheap rental tuxes and equally silly bow ties while the girls donned modest long dresses. Tao Longyue knew from that event how bad Xie Lanshan was at dancing.

Shen Liufei was still waiting patiently with his hand out. "Afraid?"

Tao Longyue tugged on Xie Lanshan's sleeve from the side, warning him soundlessly: *Don't embarrass yourself*. Nevertheless, Xie Lanshan seemed to be charmed by the man before him and gave his hand to Shen Liufei.

Just as he stepped onto the dance floor, he turned back. "Wait." Xie Lanshan pulled a hairpin off a waitress's head, tugged his hair back into a small ponytail, and stuck in the flowery hairpin to keep it in place. The beautiful adornment didn't seem too feminine on a man, and the hairstyle complemented his face. His eyes glimmering, Xie Lanshan grinned at Shen Liufei. "This is the look you like."

The ambient red light on the dance floor was ethereal and fiery, like stepping into a dream.

Xie Lanshan had never danced the tango before—more precisely, he'd never truly danced at all—but he quickly picked up the pace under Shen Liufei's lead. It didn't take long before he learned how to mimic even the slightest movements. Shen Liufei's hand wrapped gently around his waist like a firm support that would pull him back in every time Xie Lanshan lost his balance. And whenever he returned to the other man's embrace, Xie Lanshan would feel himself unconsciously following Shen Liufei's steps. Amidst the fast exchange of crossing steps, Xie Lanshan felt something inside him awaken.

As the two men danced, their movements synced, seeming to confront each other as though they were in a game of tug-of-war, getting closer and putting distance between them. As the audience around Tao Longyue cheered them on, only Xie Lanshan felt something inexplicable. His dancing was dazzling but his smile even more so.

Verve filled Xie Lanshan's eyes, while Shen Liufei's were still cold—but they both only had one another in their gazes as though nothing else was

around them.

“Someone once said, ‘Tango is the three-minute love story of a lonely man.’” After a series of fancy cross-steps, the two men fell close to a full embrace. He was convinced Shen Liufei was here for him—and had been ever since they first met in that movie theater.

Xie Lanshan turned his head and whispered almost teasingly into Shen Liufei’s ear, “Hey, cuz, are you secretly in love with me?”

This ambiguous question lingered in the air; it was rhetorical but also seemed to search for an honest answer. At the beat of the rhythm, the two separated; their eyes met once again. “How so?”

“Look, you follow me everywhere I go. If you aren’t, how can you explain that, hm?” Xie Lanshan laughed. “If you really have the hots for me, just let me know. Maybe we can stop hiding in the dark and openly announce a relationship. Wanna try?”

At the climax of the song, Shen Liufei let go of his hand and put some distance between himself and Xie Lanshan. Then the music stopped, and the lights inside the bar brightened and flashed. They dimmed before a bright spotlight shot directly toward the boxing ring.

That Thai boxer with the red shorts stood in the middle, gesturing provocatively at Shen Liufei.

Taking off his glasses, Shen Liufei stared back at him, unfazed. His eyebrows furrowed slightly, and he lifted his right hand, slowly rolling up the sleeve on his left arm, exposing his fearsome tattoo.

Xie Lanshan hadn’t fired his shot at the right time. He’d known he was getting ahead of himself earlier. Of course Shen Liufei hadn’t followed him to the bar; he was here to enter the tournament.

(vi)

The stadium was fully lit, revealing the ring: a giant cage. Not the common kind seen in professional MMA tournaments but rather a cube built from metal bars and wires.

Four matches would take place tonight at the bar: one K1 fight and three MMAs. Shen Liufei’s match was a K1. Instead of counting points, the match would continue until the opponent could no longer fight. His adversary was a locally renowned second-tier professional boxer in Thailand. Rumor had it the man had once obtained a gold belt at a Thai tournament and only had expanded his prize pool overseas as he got older.

The name rang bells among veteran fans, so the space had easily filled with thousands of cheering audience members.

Fists spoke faster than words. Shen Liufei didn't waste his time and assailed his opponent with a deadly side kick, moving swift as lightning. But the boxer didn't dodge; he took the hit head-on, blocking it with his fist.

Bam—the opponent's attack pushed Shen Liufei back half a step. The individual's boxing gloves were exceptionally thin; the lack of cotton protection created a crisp sound during the collision.

Using the instant of surprise, the red boxer charged forward with a hard punch that could break iron. Shen Liufei blocked the attack with his wrist—bones nearly shattered from the heavy fist. In a flash, he turned his head to dodge the second punch. The boxer's gloves opened a wound right on his cheekbone, which trickled fresh blood. The opponent had modified his gloves, adding a layer of thin wet-contact cement on the bandages around his arm.

Regaining his balance, Shen Liufei wiped the blood on his face away with his hand. His expression remained calm, but a slight change shone in those eyes against his sharp features, completely changing his demeanor.

Xie Lanshan noticed the unusual look and called out to the referee, "This guy's cheating!"

But the referee ignored him, not seeming to want to kill the party. Perhaps the crowd's reaction was too animated to call for a stop.

Shen Liufei returned to the defensive, completely at a disadvantage. He circled his opponent without throwing another punch. His victory seemingly in sight, the red boxer grew more eager to win the match and leave with the prize money. His attacks turned fiercer and more violent; the openings between his movements also expanded.

Shen Liufei guessed that the wet contact cement had already dried at this point. If Shen Liufei's opponent cheated, he could also bend the rules. His boxing gloves were split-fingered, so he grabbed the opponent's wrist and dragged the man toward the wired net, crushing the cement on the bandages.

Crying in agony, the red boxer struggled out of Shen Liufei's grip and stumbled back. Shen Liufei kicked, knocking the mouthpiece out of his opponent's mouth.

"Nice, Shen Liufei!" This hit turned the tables, and Xie Lanshan, outside the cage, seemed to be more excited than the fighter inside. "I fucking love you so much!"

The audience also hollered in excitement and shook the grounds with their passion; the referee hadn't stopped the match earlier and wasn't in a position to do so now.

Liu Mingfang and Li Guochang watched on the side. Li Guochang hadn't expected underground boxing to be so violent and unprofessional, but as he got ready to leave, he heard Xie Lanshan call out a name. His expression changed as he walked over and tugged on Xie Lanshan, stuttering, "Sh-Shen

Liufei? You mean that artist who studied in the US, Shen Liufei?"

"Yeah." Xie Lanshan lowered his head, watching the old man tug on his sleeves, confused as to why the man was so worked up.

"So, he's Shen Liufei, but how could he be..." Li Guochang's eyes lost focus. He mumbled to himself as if something had just blown his mind away.

"Do you... know each other?" Xie Lanshan couldn't help but grow suspicious. When the two spoke earlier, the old man clearly hadn't recognized Shen Liufei.

Shen Liufei seemed to have overheard their conversation from the ring and shot a glance at Li Guochang. His skin was pale under the spotlight and his eyes a deep black, glowing a strange neon color from the colorful illumination around the stage, like a wolf in the middle of a field of snow.

"No, no, we don't know each other. We don't..." Li Guochang quickly shook his head as his eyes met Shen Liufei's. Ignoring Liu Mingfang calling out to him from behind, the old man walked right out of the bar.

Tao Longyue had been in the restroom and strolled out at that moment. "How's the match going?"

"He'll win." After his extended imprisonment at the hospital, Xie Lanshan had finally found a rare occasion to set himself free and was cheering on the match like a wild fan. He shouted along with the audience in support of Shen Liufei, but instead of throwing curses and threats at the opponent, he yelled lines like "Love you, bro!" or "Beat him up!" until his throat was dry. He turned to Tao Longyue and pointed at the bar. "Two more beers. The tab's on you."

"Huh? Where's my wallet?" After about five seconds, Tao Longyue slapped himself in realization. "A waiter bumped into me earlier, shit!" He turned in fury, upset at the audacity. Anyone who dared to steal Captain Tao's money would not be forgiven.

Xie Lanshan gestured toward Ding Li and ran after the captain.

Captain Tao quickly caught the thief, a young woman in her early twenties with features as delicate as an ancient beauty of Chinese myths. Her hair was tied up in the same pigtail style as Ding Li, and she was also wearing a similar miniskirt. However, she wasn't a waitress and was only there to steal money.

"You think I'd let you run?!" Tao Longyue hollered and grabbed the girl's wrist.

"Hey, bro—sir, sorry I shouldn't have..." The thief whined at the force of his grip and begged, "I'll give it back to you. Just let me go..."

"I'm not a 'bro,' I'm a cop." Instantly, the thief's face grew pale, and her soft and fine features crumpled into sorrow. Tao Longyue's heart softened, making him loosen his grip. His tone became gentler. "So, tell me, is this your first time?"

If it was, he planned on letting her off the hook and simply giving her a scolding since there hadn't been much money in the wallet anyway. Just as Captain Tao considered how to educate her, the young woman tugged on her clothes, stripping right in front of him. She wore nothing under her crop top.

Despite his flirtatiousness, Captain Tao was quite a maiden at heart. His relationships with the opposite sex only existed in the form of daydreams of the pretty girls in class. Having never seen such a brazen and shameless woman, he closed his eyes instinctively in embarrassment. The young woman grabbed his shoulder and lifted her knee, hitting the most fragile area between the captain's legs.

The sensation was bitter and painful, making the captain nearly yelp in agony.

Xie Lanshan and Ding Li found Tao Longyue squatting on the ground, his face scrunched in pain as he pointed behind him. "O-over there... hurry up..."

Holding in his laughter, Xie Lanshan ordered Ding Li, "Stay here and keep an eye on your captain."

Xie Lanshan rushed after her, leaping right over the bar table on the side. He blocked the way between the thief and the exit behind him.

Assuming this man was also a cop who hadn't seen a wild girl like her before, the thief pulled the same act, exposing her chest.

"34C." Xie Lanshan didn't react. Instead of shock or embarrassment, approval shone in his eyes. "Not bad."

The girl rolled down her shirt as if she'd been harassed. Less than a second later, she averted her gaze and pulled up her skirt.

Xie Lanshan grabbed her hand before she could do anything.

"Hey, bro..."

"That was a nice show you put on earlier. I should thank you for the entertainment." Xie Lanshan's grip was still tight, his expression stern and unwilling to yield. "But you will need to come with me."

Finally defeated, the girl handed over everything she had stolen, which would have been quite a handful of prizes if she hadn't been caught: three cell phones and two wallets.

Judging from her dexterity, she wasn't new at this. "What's your na—" Xie Lanshan began, following procedure, but then froze, seeming to forget how to breathe.

Within the blink of an eye, the young woman disappeared.

Xie Lanshan still stood frozen, then turned around to search for something in a frenzy. His gaze scanned everywhere from the lit-up stage to the dark corners of the bar.

The bustling neon lights, glittering decorations, vibrant carpets, and obnoxious geometric shapes on the walls created a surreal and dizzying

environment, but Xie Lanshan had to stay awake. He clearly felt a gaze peering at him from the depths of darkness.

“What’s taking you so long?” Tao Longyue saw Xie Lanshan walk back by himself. “Where did she go?”

“I released her.” Xie Lanshan forced himself to smile, but his mood for the night had been completely ruined.

“How could you?!” Captain Tao was furious. “She assaulted a police officer!”

Xie Lanshan didn’t answer; his gaze floated back to the cage. “Where’s Shen Liufei?”

During the brief time he was gone, a new match with new contestants had stepped into the spotlight. It was clearly not as exciting, and the crowd booed in disappointment.

“Shen Liufei’s a nonprofessional fighter, what they call a ‘prizefighter’ in the community.” Tao Longyue pointed at another young man inside the cage, who was already bruised up by his opponent. “Look at this other prizefighter.”

As Tao Longyue spoke, Xie Lanshan’s heartbeat grew faster. “What happened to Shen Liufei?”

“Nothing serious.” Tao Longyue wasn’t too pleased to see his buddy worry so much over Shen Liufei. His lips turned slightly in disappointment. “He’s actually on the same level as a professional and not just an amateur. It’s mind-blowing for an artist to have that kind of ability.”

“What about the dude in red shorts?”

“Got KO’ed.”

With a sigh of relief, Xie Lanshan took out all the cell phones and wallets to return to their owners.

The moment he turned around, he saw Liu Mingfang in an argument with a waitress.

“Sorry, I’m sorry. We posted a sign in the bar warning everyone to be careful of their personal belongings...” The waitress apologized meekly, but the man showed no sign of forgiving her. He continued to scold the poor young woman harshly.

“My wallet has my important IDs, so I’m holding you responsible since it was lost in your establishment.” Perhaps tonight was not his night; his business negotiation had failed, and he’d even lost his wallet on top of everything. The alcohol in Liu Mingfang burned as the man fumed. He tugged the waitress’s collar. “Do you know who I am? I dare you to try me. Watch as I shut down your whole bar!”

Xie Lanshan handed Tao Longyue’s wallet back to the captain, then opened up another to check whether it was Liu Mingfang’s.

The first thing he saw was a photo of Song Qilian taken before she'd turned twenty. Her smile beamed with vitality and youth in this photo, like the playful and fickle weather of early summer in June. Xie Lanshan had always responded to her with silence and earned complaints that he was too boring from her, but he had enjoyed his time with her.

As the smile reminded him of the somber past, Xie Lanshan fell into a daze. He shut his eyes and let out a light sigh, then he closed the wallet and walked toward Liu Mingfang.

"I got this from a pickpocket. Take a look and see if you're missing anything." Xie Lanshan tapped lightly on Liu Mingfang's shoulder.

Liu Mingfang took the wallet in a rage, opened it and grew even more furious. He had no doubt Xie Lanshan had also seen Song Qilian's—his ex-wife's—photo.

"Who said you can touch my stuff?! Who gave you the right?! The one she hugs when she's satisfied in bed is me! And when she's tired of it, the one who gets a slap in the face is still me!"

"You piece of shit!" Tao Longyue was also a former classmate of Song Qilian's. He had heard some stories about her eventual divorce. If Xie Lanshan hadn't pressed on his shoulders, he would have violently punched Liu Mingfang in the chin.

"Big Tao, you're a cop." Xie Lanshan pressed on the nape of Tao Longyue's neck from behind and pulled him away. Whenever he found himself falling into an abyss of agony and wavering, Xie Lanshan would use these words to discipline him and remind him he shouldered a societal duty.

But Liu Mingfang refused to give up. The veins on his forehead popped and he swung his fist from behind. "You think you're a national hero just because you made the headlines a few times now? My dad said you were behind the deaths of your comrades while you were undercover. You're nothing but a rotten apple!"

The entire way out, the two men practically walked shoulder to shoulder with Xie Lanshan shoving Tao Longyue along. Though the captain was trembling in anger, he realized that Xie Lanshan was shaking even more upon hearing the words, *"You were behind the deaths of your comrades."*

Of course, Liu Mingfang didn't stop there and continued to mutter beneath his breath as they walked away, "Yeah, that's right, use those fingers of yours to count how many policemen have died because of you..."

His last bit of interest in watching the match vanished as Xie Lanshan pushed Tao Longyue away and walked out of the door with his head hung down. The distance between the front rows of the boxing ring to the bar's exit seemed excessively long. When Xie Lanshan finally looked up again, he saw Shen Liufei. The latter had already taken off his boxing gear. Blood stained his

white shirt, but he didn't bother to change. The injuries on his face and blood on his clothing made him resemble a soldier back from the battlefield. He had won the battle, but he didn't return unscathed.

They were all wounded soldiers tonight.

A strange sense of affinity surfaced; Xie Lanshan's mood instantly lifted, and he placed his hands into his pockets and casually called out, "Hey, I'm getting tired of the noise in here. How about we go out for a drink or two?"

Shen Liufei grabbed Xie Lanshan's wrist, ignoring Tao Longyue calling from behind, and dragged the man out.

Outside, Xie Lanshan took in a heavy breath of fresh air. The two found some bare ground and sat down beside each other with two empty beer cans in their hands. After they left the loud and lively crowd, the night returned to its natural state of silence and darkness. The evening breeze blew past like the gentle waves of the ocean, and the yellow canna flowers on the side of the street danced in sync with the wind.

Shen Liufei's gaze fell on the pair of glasses in his hands. He sat in silence.

Xie Lanshan couldn't picture the delicate gold-rimmed glasses on this man and felt his interest piqued. He grabbed the glasses without a word and rested them on the bridge of his nose, then, gasping in surprise, asked, "Wow, these are fake?"

"I used to have a prescription, but I'm too used to wearing them," Shen Liufei responded.

Xie Lanshan leaned in toward Shen Liufei until their breath mingled. He stared into Shen Liufei's eyes and asked, "You got surgery?"

Unfazed, Shen Liufei leaned in closer and said airily, "What do you think?"

It wasn't possible to see whether someone had received vision-correction surgery. Xie Lanshan only saw a pair of beautiful dark eyes before him; the corner of the eyes arched up at an alluring angle, which was accompanied by long, black lashes that framed a charming gaze. Xie Lanshan felt his heart skip a beat before he turned away and said awkwardly, "You're fascinating. I don't think there's another artist in China who could beat up a professional Thai boxer like you."

Shen Liufei pondered before he responded, "I need to abstain."

Xie Lanshan laughed. "Abstain by releasing pressure? Abstain from what?"

Shen Liufei didn't respond. He merely turned to look at Xie Lanshan with a hard-to-read gaze, as if he had set down grief he was too young to carry.

A short while later, Shen Liufei reached an arm out and pulled Xie Lanshan into an embrace. This action surprised the latter. Xie Lanshan felt the strength in the arms that wrapped around him as he rested by Shen Liufei. He closed his eyes and felt the charisma engulf him, feeding his rumbling heart.

Tao Longyue's sudden appearance interrupted their long moment together, yet neither of the men questioned one another further after their strange hug. They bid each other farewell as if nothing had happened. Xie Lanshan got into Tao Longyue's golden Volkswagen while Shen Liufei called a cab.

Just as Shen Liufei gave his address to the driver, his phone rang. "I'll be flying back to see you in two months." The voice on the line asked, "I couldn't get in contact with you today. Did you go drifting or boxing again?"

"I know my limits." After the hard fight, Shen Liufei was exhausted. He leaned his head back in the cab and stared at the ceiling. The car hadn't been washed in ages, so stains and dust were visible everywhere.

"How is it going with *him*?" the voice asked.

Shen Liufei fell into a long silence, long enough to make the person on the other end suspect he had already hung up the line.

Finally, Shen Liufei closed his eyes and said in English, "He's a good cop."

Almost immediately after he hung up, another call came in. Shen Liufei looked at the screen to see a number he didn't recognize.

The ringing was persistent. After a short moment of hesitation, he picked up.

An old man's voice rang out, "It's me, Li Guochang."

Before going undercover, Sui Hong had once posed Xie Lanshan with a question: "There are five children on one side of a railway and one child on the other side. A train is approaching and cannot stop in time; if you could change the direction at the split, would you choose to save the five children or the one child?"

Xie Lanshan hadn't realized this was a famous moral dilemma and fell into a spiral of self-questioning as he struggled to respond. This was almost as excruciating as the question of saving one's mother or wife.

He summarized the question and asked Sui Hong, "Are you asking me to choose between saving one person or the world?"

Sui Hong nodded solemnly. "Yes. Are you trying to save someone, or are you trying to save the world?"

Xie Lanshan felt his heart ache at this difficult decision. He subconsciously held the bullet around his neck and almost heard his old man whispering into his ears. His heart calmed as he finally responded firmly, "I want to save both."

Sui Hong rested a hand on Xie Lanshan's shoulder with a smile. He shook his head gently without another word. This young man was naïve to a fault, but his passion was fiery and respectable. Sui Hong wasn't sure how to feel until he met Xie Lanshan's firm and determined gaze, until the fire in those eyes struck fear into him.

Of course, Xie Lanshan wouldn't have thought that this moral dilemma would haunt him again and again for the next six years in his undercover life.

To show gratitude for Xie Lanshan's selfless deed in the mountains, Mu Kun offered to share some "clothes" with him upon their return. "Don't you Chinese people have a saying? 'Brothers are like your limbs and women like your clothes'?"

Despite the rumors he was only interested in men, Mu Kun had numerous concubines. The woman before him was one, and she was considered the most striking and fierce woman within his garden of flowers. Her unique personality and ability to hold up a fight had earned Mu Kun's trust and approval. To thank Xie Lanshan for carrying him across the raging river, Mu Kun said he was willing to share his *clothes* with his brother.

He scratched the little stubble on his chin, his gaze almost playful. "Maybe Southeast Asian women aren't your type, but I have a feeling that you'll like this one."

The woman was called Annie. According to Mu Kun, Annie was half Chinese and came from a beach city in the northern region of China. Tall and cold-looking, she donned a short and clean haircut that was almost shaved off on the top but still maintained a strong feminine attractiveness. Annie had a model's body: slim legs and a busty chest.

Inside the bedroom, Xie Lanshan remained unresponsive like a stubborn gay man who despised any form of intimacy with women.

She was confident and proud of her body, so Xie Lanshan's lack of reaction upset her. "Useless piece of trash." Annie put her clothes back on and gave a mocking smile, then walked out of the room and slammed the door.

Xie Lanshan remained silent. He didn't care about this comment.

Then he heard the violent cry of a little girl from the room next door, and blood rushed to his head.

After that night, Xie Lanshan found that, in order to better control his subordinates, Mu Kun not only relied on narcotics but even trafficked young girls. He mostly kidnapped or trafficked them from the underground. A disguised brothel hid about thirty children as young as seven or eight, to fourteen or fifteen at most. To buy off the local military forces, Mu Kun would sometimes send them off to please the sick interests of some authority in Myanmar.

If Xie Lanshan chose to save those little girls, he could risk exposing his identity and losing the opportunity to complete his mission to destroy the hub of these drug lords.

Instead, he decided to fulfill the promise he made to himself.

Later, during a clear, starry night, a mysterious fire struck the hidden brothel. The guards were shot dead in the head, and all the captive girls successfully escaped.

An individual had single-handedly taken down the brothel. They must have been good at what they did. On top of that, they had to have known the guards' schedule, which could only mean it was an inside job.

Mu Kun enjoyed taming his animals on normal days, but if the beasts started to run out of control, he would not hesitate to slit their throats with his own two hands. Holding a gun, Mu Kun summoned all of his close subordinates together, including Xie Lanshan. He wanted to find the traitor. "Where were you last night?"

Xie Lanshan stood but remained expressionless, waiting for Mu Kun to question him. He had no alibi, so he had only one inevitable end. After the long night of fighting, Xie Lanshan was exhausted. Like an oil lamp running out of fuel, his lingering flame swayed, threatening extinction.

But just as he was at the brink of life and death, Annie stood up and faced Mu Kun's bloodshot eyes. Without breaking a sweat, she claimed Xie Lanshan had been with her the whole night.

Mu Kun was working hard to get Xie Lanshan to open up more, as it was the only way to ensure this brother of his truly shared the same values and morals. Once he realized the two of them could sink deeper into the abyss together, his mood immediately lifted. In the end, he shot another close subordinate who couldn't explain where they were, then walked out with an arm around Xie Lanshan to spend some quality time in the sauna.

As it turned out, a high-ranking officer of the Myanmar military spending time in the brothel had died in the fire. The station troops were furious. Mu Kun didn't want to cause more trouble and delayed the plans to rebuild.

Of course, Mu Kun wasn't dumb. He noticed Xie Lanshan's little acts that occasionally helped local authorities intercept their drug trade. Xie Lanshan constantly walked on the bank of the river. Sometimes, the water splashed back onto him. Even as careful as he was, every time he delivered intel to his allies, accidents happened. One such incident was the reason Liu Mingfang was pointing at him many years later and accusing him of killing his own comrades.

To obtain information from Xie Lanshan, a special forces officer disguised himself as a local drug dealer to trade with Mu Kun's men. Yet, as they completed their transaction and the officer stepped out of the bar with the drug dealers, a neighbor of the cop—a Chinese man on vacation in Myanmar—saw them. A little tipsy from drinking, he wobbled over to see his neighbor. "Hey, Officer Liu, you here for a case?"

Mu Kun captured the special forces officer and interrogated him, trying to discover the mole in his midst. “Who did you meet up with?” Mu Kun’s sharp and venomous eyes narrowed. “I’ll let you go if you tell me.”

Covered in fresh blood, the officer still refused to out Xie Lanshan—or perhaps he wasn’t refusing, but the thought of selling out his comrade had never even crossed his mind. He lifted a finger toward Gold Tooth, grinning. “It’s him.”

Mu Kun had his way of dealing with those who refused to crack. A blade appeared in his hands, flashed momentarily, and reappeared in the officer’s eye.

The entire act took only seconds, but it felt like an eternity. The officer’s cries rang out in the night, but he refused to even hint at the truth.

“You’re a tough one, huh? Looks like we’ll have to continue tomorrow.” After hours of torture, even Mu Kun was tired and bored. He tossed the bloody knife from his hand and smiled grotesquely. “I have a subordinate who used to sell meat in the black market. I heard his skills are pretty good. I’ll bring him over tomorrow. I’ll wait until we rip the skin off you and leave you to be a bloody living corpse; your eyes and mouth will still be able to move, but it won’t be a quick death. Sounds awful, right?”

“Just kill me already!” The officer’s roar once again ripped through the night. He repeated the same words desperately, “I dare you to just kill me right now!”

Mu Kun had eyes on every corner of his territory; there was no way to save this man. Hesitation and disorientation consumed Xie Lanshan. He finally decided he would shoot the man dead, saving his comrade from further suffering.

While the night was clear, Xie Lanshan stole a gun and made his move. Yet, before he could even make it into range, a gunshot rang out. Then another. Three, four times. A person dropped to the ground on top of the corpse of the special forces officer.

The druggies heard the gunshots and rushed toward the source. Xie Lanshan took this opportunity to hide within the crowd. Annie lay in a pool of blood riddled in gunshot wounds with a single handgun beside her hand.

The officer who had suffered a round of torture was now resting in eternal slumber. Xie Lanshan squatted beside Annie. From an outsider’s perspective, they all agreed the two had developed an intimate relationship, so Xie Lanshan’s reaction was not out of the ordinary.

“I overheard...” Annie struggled to lift herself up and leaned on Xie Lanshan, blood rolling from her mouth, her words jumbling. “Mu Kun said whoever comes to kill this Chinese cop tonight is the traitor...”

Despite knowing the consequences, she'd thrown herself into the fire so Xie Lanshan's identity would remain hidden. Yet, aside from the first time she saved him, the two could not even be considered acquaintances. Xie Lanshan repressed the tears welling up in his eyes and questioned her silently with his gaze: *Why?*

"My sister... was also there..." Annie's ten-year-old sister had also been in that brothel. She, a powerless woman who hadn't dared to save her younger sister, was surprised a foreigner risked his life to rescue the entire group. The normally cold and distant woman gave Xie Lanshan an exceptionally warm smile. She slowly closed her eyes, her breathing fading. "Officer Xie... you really are... you really are Buddha..."

Annie died happily without regrets knowing she had finally repaid this man. Before her death, she hadn't managed to tell him Buddha couldn't stain himself in sin, nor had she absolved him of carrying the shackles of the events that had transpired for the rest of his mortal life.

Then I will dirty my hands for you.

"Cut her chest off and feed it to the dogs."

After sending out his orders like a spoiled child basking in satisfaction, Mu Kun walked toward Xie Lanshan, wrapped an arm around the young cop's shoulders, and said, "We finally caught the traitor. Let's get a drink to celebrate."

Xie Lanshan downed a handful of drinks and found an excuse to use the restroom. Walking far away from the celebrating drug traffickers, he locked the door and cried soundlessly.

The short dream was as fleeting and distant as a memory from his past life. The man once again sank down inside the bathtub, holding in his breath. As he reached his limit, he sat up and opened his eyes in the darkness. Large droplets of water rolled down his face, almost like tears. He had used a lifetime of tears in that smoky and small restroom, all for his brave and honorable comrade—for the courageous stranger Annie.

Xie Lanshan walked in front of the mirror and smiled at the handsome man in the reflection. Sometimes he believed this was the real reason he had a smile permanently plastered on his face.

Deep into the night, a few moths chased after the light and crashed into the mirror inside the bathroom. The cats outside of the house gathered and together whined for attention.

Night had fallen. Before he realized it, moths circled them as though they were the only light source in the darkness. Before today, Xie Lanshan had never told this story to anyone; those excruciatingly painful but vivid memories seemed like they were from a past life, yet they still haunted him.

The ever-present smile was what preserved his hope, his optimism that was like the broad and tranquil sky allowing the rain clouds to pass without leaving a trace.

National Treasure

At the start of the new week, the violent crime unit captain stepped into the municipal bureau, found Ding Li at first glance, and was pleased to see her hair had returned to black as she had promised.

"Captain Tao, someone's looking for you," Ding Li said to Tao Longyue. "She's been waiting for ten minutes already saying she wants to report a crime."

"Report a crime?" Reporting directly to a unit captain of an investigative department wasn't standard procedure. "Are there no officers around?"

Ding Li's expression was off, as though she were suppressing pain—or holding in laughter. "The person specifically requested to speak to you. We were afraid it might be a serious crime, so we didn't want to step in and make any decisions."

Tao Longyue turned toward Xie Lanshan's seat. It was empty; the man was late again. Complaining under his breath, he walked into the reporting office.

Ding Li sped along behind him. The weird smile lingered on her face as she stared directly at him the whole way.

"What? You constipated?" Tao Longyue wasn't too happy with this unsolicited look and pointed his frustration back on her with more hostility. Suspicious, he opened the door to the reporting office and froze the moment he saw the person sitting casually on the other side. The air choked his throat.

Though she no longer had the colorful hair dyes, the pigtails, or the super-short miniskirt, the individual was that little thief who had flashed him at the bar two days ago.

Tao Longyue fumed, ready to commit murder himself. He shot a deathly glare at Ding Li. Of course Ding Li knew about the awful incident, but she didn't have the guts to laugh out loud and had been trying to suppress it before her superior.

"Hey there, Captain Tao," the thief greeted him first and pulled her long legs off the tabletop to stand, then rushed toward the man enthusiastically—as though they were friends.

"S-stay back!" Before the young woman could even make it close enough to touch him, Captain Tao tensed. A drop of cold sweat rolled down his forehead. That unbearable pain between his legs seemed to have been summoned back.

Ding Li could no longer hold it in; she burst out laughing.

After wiping herself clean of the heavy makeup and removing her strange outfit, the young woman was quite a fair lady. A thin layer of blush complemented her white skin and slightly sloping eyes, making her look like an ancient beauty from a period drama.

However, Captain Tao was not in the mood to appreciate beauty at this time. Instead, he glared defensively at her, his face turning dark like coal. "How did you find me?"

"Your ID's in your wallet; I've seen it before." She then added slyly, "Listen, I just picked up the wallet you lost, so of course I would take a look inside."

Hearing these obnoxious words, Tao Longyue was ready to laugh in anger. "So what kind of crime are you reporting?"

"Why don't you ask who I am first? Are you even following proper procedure?"

"Then what's your name?"

"Tang Xiaomo." Tang Xiaomo seemed satisfied now with the respect of the homicide and violent crime unit captain. She then cleared her throat and said sternly, "I'm here to report a crime. The *Ode to the Goddess Luo* painting on display in the Crane Museum is a fake."

Captain Tao knew about the Crane Museum—that was where they first ran into Shen Liufei by accident, but this was the first time Captain Tao had ever heard of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*. "What painting?"

"Can you guys get another officer instead of him? That other real handsome one at the bar last time, he should do just fine." Tang Xiaomo fanned her hand before her nose and turned to Ding Li, then shot a sneaky glance at Tao Longyue before making a disgusted expression. "This leader of yours ain't good enough."

"Hey, you, don't get cheeky!" If the individual wasn't a young woman speaking inside an official public building, Captain Tao would be rolling his sleeves up to give her a beating.

"Don't you cops watch TV?" Seeing how neither of the officers before her seemed to understand, Tang Xiaomo's eyes widened in shock as she gasped dramatically. "Y'know, the National Treasures channel, a real classic."

"Oh, that I've seen." Ding Li was one of the rare individuals in the team who was cultured enough to keep up with the trends. To put it more bluntly, she was perhaps the biggest gossip out of the entire Hanhai City Public Bureau. "But I've heard this painting isn't even on display yet. How are you so sure it's a fake?"

"Because a friend of mine painted it. I can tell." After noticing the disbelief on the cop's face, Tang Xiaomo panicked. "Listen, I'm actually from a

traditional artist family from generations ago! I suspect the piece got exchanged for a phony, so you guys should hurry up and investigate it before it's too late! If they catch that it's fake after it goes on display, the whole world will be laughing!"

Xie Lanshan walked inside the office building, saw Tang Xiaomo, and remembered the thief's antics. He simply smiled and greeted her, "Hey there, Miss C-cup."

Tang Xiaomo grew flustered. "That's inappropriate for a cop. I'm going to file a complaint."

"Why does this little girl live like she's perpetually stuck in fight-or-flight? She seems at the ready to knock someone else off as collateral damage at any moment." Xie Lanshan feigned disappointment but still laughed it off as if he were speaking to a friend. "Didn't you hear the saying before—the bigger one's chest, the bigger one's heart?"

"You still think this is funny?" Tao Longyue shot a glance at Xie Lanshan. The latter caught the message and walked outside with the captain.

The two men closed the door outside of the office room. Seeing the fatigue on Xie Lanshan's face, Tao Longyue asked in concern, "What's up? Couldn't sleep again?"

"Yeah." Xie Lanshan clearly didn't want to discuss this issue further and instead jumped straight to the point. "So what do you think about what that girl just said?"

"She's a thief and little liar. You really want to take her word for it?" Tao Longyue's expression grew stern. "Just kick her out."

"She might not be lying," Xie Lanshan said. "Your old man summoned me over earlier."

"To tell you to get a haircut?"

"No, he wants us to work with the Crane Museum and traffic department to provide back-end security for the exhibit." Xie Lanshan withheld the urge to roll his eyes. Captain Tao might have been a professional when it came to his job but he was a clueless lost lamb about what trended outside. "Do you not watch the news? The museum is planning on hosting an exhibit called Impressions of China. They collected famous calligraphy and artwork from the Jin, Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties to display. Among them, the most important piece of art will be the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* Li Guochang brought back from the US. Many Western scholars of ancient Chinese art and well-known collectors think this is the real deal. It's been lost for thousands of years."

"Li Guochang?" Tao Longyue pondered for a few moments. "You mean that old guy we met at the boxing bar?"

“Yeah.” Xie Lanshan nodded. “And as for whether it’s the original work or not—our country’s media has more reserved opinions than the ones overseas—the whole thing is already blowing up on the internet from accounts with large followings debating whether it is. Either way, even if it’s a replica created in the Tang or Song dynasty, it’s still worth billions.”

“Billions?” Poverty certainly limited one’s imagination. Tao Longyue asked in disbelief, “Exactly how much is it worth?”

“Like *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* and *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, it’s one of the ten greatest paintings of China; how much do you think?”

“So you’re saying...” Tao Longyue calculated a quick estimation in his head for the reliable Liu Mingfang. “If Li Guochang was willing to auction this painting or even sell it privately, Liu Mingfang could have easily earned over one hundred million in agent fees?!”

“Think bigger; if this is the original painting, it’s worth far more.” Xie Lanshan was surprised. “But why did you suddenly bring up Liu Mingfang?”

“Remember how we met Liu Mingfang? I asked my old man about it later, and he told me this little shit has been parading around using his dad’s name this whole time. He thought nobody’d dare wrong him if he mentioned his dad and did whatever the hell he wanted, but now it’s bitten him in the ass. His company’s in a financial pit and on the brink of bankruptcy.”

(ii)

By the time they arrived at the Crane Museum, Tao Longyue and Xie Lanshan were surprised to see a familiar form. A unique silhouette stood out to them like a swan among a pond of ducks; his back was straight and tall, and easily recognizable even without glimpsing a face. Tao Longyue turned toward Xie Lanshan and asked in almost a whisper, “Did you call him out?”

“I haven’t had the chance.” Xie Lanshan gave a small smile to the person. “I guess we’re just always operating on the same wavelength.”

To Shen Liufei’s side stood the executive manager of the Crane Museum, Zhang Wenli. The man was about forty years of age, thin and tall, but appeared rather spirited. Rumor had it he was an artist himself, but his style differed from Shen Liufei’s—while the younger artist was heavily influenced by Western techniques, Zhang Wenli had studied traditional Chinese art since his childhood but never really made a name for himself in the field. Though his artistic skills were only average, his business senses were remarkable. A man of outstanding managerial experience and social reputation, Zhang Wenli held multiple leadership roles at various art organizations.

Feeling a little guilty, Tao Longyue announced he was here on behalf of the municipal bureau. “I still think that girl was probably lying, but it’s important to make sure everything is cleared and secure before such a significant exhibition.”

“No worries. It’s our job as well. I will leave it to you all to take care of the security for the Impressions of China exhibit.” Zhang Wenli’s response was courteous and professional. “However, because *Ode to the Goddess Luo* has not officially been returned to the government and still belongs to Mr. Li Guochang’s personal collection, the man is currently in charge of handling it. It is not yet in the Crane Museum.”

Zhang Wenli expressed that he also could not help any further with determining the authenticity of the prized painting. “I am just as anxious about it as you all are, and am dying to see the national treasure myself.”

Shen Liufei followed Zhang Wenli. “There are currently nine known paintings of *Ode to the Goddess Luo* collected by museums around the world. The one in Li Guochang’s hands is the tenth and final painting of the series, and has only been made public through media coverage in the West so far. A renowned scholar of classical Chinese art from Princeton University authenticated the painting as the original, and some experts from China have also made their way to the States to confirm it. While some believe it is not the original, experts generally agree this is the closest and most faithful replica if proven to be a copy.” He paused slightly. “But it’s important to note the National Committee of Historical and Cultural Appraisal has made no official comments yet. They will need to wait for it to officially return for the government to send out an appraisal team.”

“In other words, a little girl who hasn’t even seen the actual painting herself couldn’t possibly determine whether it’s a fake or not.” The simple conclusion was one anyone could come to. Xie Lanshan turned to Shen Liufei. “But let’s assume what you said about the painting is true. If this is really a lost national treasure that suddenly appeared in another country, and even managed to convince multiple scholars and experts, doesn’t that mean it would have some sort of reliable or believable backstory?”

“And that’s where Mr. Shen here can give everyone a lecture.” Zhang Wenli grinned at Shen Liufei, yet the latter didn’t bat an eye. From these small motions, the middle-aged man clearly respected Shen Liufei a lot, and perhaps even revered the younger man.

Xie Lanshan didn’t hesitate to display his curiosity and grinned at Shen Liufei as well. “I’d be honored to listen.”

Shen Liufei said, “This *Ode to the Goddess Luo* is likely the painting the little white tower lost over the years; it’s what Beijing antique collectors call a ‘northeast lot.’”

Tao Longyue asked, “What’s the little white tower?”

“During the Manchu State period, a white tower within the Manchukuo Imperial Palace Museum was built specifically to collect all of the ancient relics and art Emperor Puyi had taken out of the National Palace Museum. It was later known in history as the ‘little white tower.’ When Japan surrendered in 1945, Puyi left the Manchukuo Imperial Palace in Changchun, and a massive number of national treasures were later taken away by the Imperial Guards. An Imperial Guard by the family name of Zeng stole countless famous artworks and paintings; among them was a piece of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo,* the piece now in Li Guochang’s hands. The Zeng family later immigrated to America and established a relatively successful life for many generations. They had been rather wealthy until quite recently. Due to the recession forcing them to the brink of bankruptcy, the family had no choice but to sell this painting for extra funds. Li Guochang purchased this painting for four and a half million USD. Of course, he didn’t even consider the possibility it would be an original at the time of the auction and paid, thinking it was a replica—”

Tao Longyue interrupted. “Wait, even a fake is worth four and a half million dollars?!”

Shen Liufei shot a quick glance at him. “A replica and fake are two completely different concepts; I’m sure the little girl that reported the crime must have gotten it mixed up as well. The *Ode to the Goddess Luo* on display in the National Palace Museum right now is a replica. According to the records on the Shiqi Baoji from the Qianlong period, it was a copy drawn by an anonymous artist from the Song dynasty.”

“Well, she didn’t get it mixed up. She actually said it was drawn by one of her friends...”

“How is that possible?” Zhang Wenli couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m not a professional artist here, but Mr. Shen is. How about we ask our teacher here to replicate it?”

Shen Liufei shook his head. “I can’t.”

Captain Tao gave a bit more thought and also decided it sounded ridiculous, then closed his mouth for good.

Xie Lanshan was not as simpleminded and brought up his own reasonable suspicion. “So, let’s assume that the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* Li Guochang bought is an original from the actual artist, Gu Kaizhi. If the two paintings were all palace treasures from the Qing dynasty, why did the replica get recorded in a proper historical text, while the original painting, lost during the fall of the Manchu State, received no mention at all? Are you saying Emperor Qianlong didn’t separate a copy from the original or had a bad eye to appraise fine art?”

“That may actually be the case. The imperial collection had always been a mix of original and replicated works. Let’s look at the two *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* paintings from Taipei’s Palace Museum collection, for example. Emperor Qianlong assumed the Ziming scroll was the original art, but scholars later generally agreed the Wuyongshi scroll was actually the original.” Shen Liufei pulled the corner of his lips up into a very faint smile. “The emperor spent too much time on the soap opera with his concubines every day and made a mistake.”

The staff around all had their eyes glued on Shen Liufei. Admiration filled their faces. Quite a few other visitors around also stopped to listen to the deep but soft and soothing voice speaking about intellectual matters.

Of course, the homicide and violent crime unit captain was not about to back down either. Tao Longyue had his own opinions on fine art appraisal. “But even as one of the most famous paintings of history, the theme in the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* is love. It’s nowhere near the grand scale of the other two depicting the landscapes of the country.”

“It isn’t as unimportant as you would think. It depends on your interpretation.” Shen Liufei turned to Xie Lanshan. “A lifetime is both long and short. Some people have their sights fixed on the faraway past or future, and some are always looking in different directions, while others are simply on a search for that certain someone—and that someone will always be the warmth during a snowstorm, no matter how long one lives.”

Shen Liufei’s eyes looked much different. Instead of their usual cold light, they were filled with kindness and sorrow. Xie Lanshan found himself captivated; a strange sensation brewed within him, quickly filling his chest.

Xie Lanshan broke the awkward atmosphere. “So why did Li Guochang look so surprised when he heard your name?”

Shen Liufei retracted the smile. His expression turned cold once again. “That you will have to ask him yourself.”

(iii)

The group had a tour of the Crane Museum, starting from the West Hall going to the East Hall. Museums were always changing, like a kaleidoscope; it looked much different than the last time the officers visited when Shen Liufei’s personal art gallery of eerie portraits and dark sceneries had been exhibited. Shen Liufei’s style leaned on the rough side but with crisp and sharp details. Even though the artwork depicted horrifying tales, the contrasting gothic motifs made them irresistible and captivating to the eyes, like a well-made trap.

Currently, the first floor of the eastern building was closed off to set up the new exhibition. It was like a movie set; groups of people worked restlessly. This location was being constructed to recreate a scene from the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* painting. Numerous life-sized wax statues of the goddess decorated the area in ethereal poses on sculpted clouds. The stands were meticulously adorned with fine details, faithfully recreating even the fishes and whales depicted in the original painting.

The most impressive was the statue of the goddess herself that resembled a real human of breathtaking beauty, taking Captain Tao by surprise.

"The *Ode to the Goddess Luo* is a collection of paintings depicting interconnecting stories, so we've decided to pick out six different impressions of the Luo Goddess from six different parts of the painting to recreate as wax statues. In addition, the sceneries in the paintings were also carefully and faithfully recreated in real life." Zhang Wenli noticed the two officers' captivated looks. "This is Mr. Li's idea; he's obsessed with the story of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*, and we all thought it would be an interesting touch. An opening ceremony is scheduled to be held the first day of the exhibition. This entire hall, where we are recreating the world in the paintings, is one of the core elements making up the theme of the Impressions of China exhibition."

Captain Tao circled around the Goddess, mumbling beneath his breath, "Amazing, truly amazing... if you don't look at them closely, you'd almost think they're real people."

"We did originally plan on hiring real actors to dress up as the Luo Goddess to perform live dancing and singing. The opening day of the exhibition is going to be filled with visitors." Zhang Wenli knew people loved celebrity eye candy and said in slight disappointment, "But Mr. Li said, out of consideration for the safety of the artifacts and paintings on display, the idea should be replaced with wax figures."

"It may be exciting during the day of the opening, but the tragic love between a god and man depicted here is meant to be wistful." Shen Liufei added coolly, "Live performances will only rile up the exhibition and steal the spotlight. It's simply unnecessary."

A young man's voice said from behind the group, "Mr. Shen is right."

The group turned their heads to see a young man dressed in a suit standing not far behind them. Due to the time constraints before the exhibit, the diligent workers were all covered in sweat from working around the clock. This young man in the suit stood among them, meticulously directing the display construction and precise positioning of the wax statues. He was Qin Ke, a personal secretary of Li Guochang. He had spent many years studying in America and majoring in Chinese Art History before returning to China to

represent his boss to negotiate with the museum for this exhibit.

Perhaps people working in the art industry always displayed a puzzling and unique duality; most were like Liu Mingfang—greedy demons beneath their fair skins, while others seemed almost too aloof and ethereal to belong to any gender—like Qin Ke, a fine-looking young man with features as delicate as a flower.

Captain Tao, who was decidedly allergic to these types of people, couldn't help but complain in his head. *Well, well, here we go again, another pretty-faced femme man.*

"Mr. Li has also poured a lot of effort into this exhibition and hopes that every detail is presented as perfectly as can be. We must also thank the owner of the museum for being so cooperative." Even Xie Lanshan, who hadn't been paying much attention, had his interest piqued by this voice. The young man's voice was clear and strong, like the sound of an antique string instrument and it was strangely similar to Shen Liufei's. From the sound of it, the Crane Museum seemed to be very thorough with their preparations for the exhibit.

"Old Li was generous enough to return such a valuable national treasure back to his home country. This is an honorable feat! We're obligated to repay him by working together to make this exhibit a success." Zhang Wenli then turned to Qin Ke. "But Old Li called me last night. He said he changed his mind and didn't want to put it up for exhibition anymore. Do you know why that is?"

Tao Longyue was surprised. "But it's scheduled to open this weekend—can you cancel a whole exhibit with just two days left?"

Zhang Wenli nodded. "Of course we can. This is Mr. Li's personal collection, so we can't force him to do anything. If he doesn't wish for the painting to be on display, we will have to respect his decision."

Shaking his head, Qin Ke answered with a smile, "Don't worry. It's nothing too serious. Mrs. Li simply had an argument with her husband that night. The painting will still be on display, and whatever needs to be donated will still be given back to the government. Mr. Li's wife flew all the way from the States for this event, and, naturally, the couple got into several arguments over whether they should donate the painting. The two finally reached a truce. Otherwise they'd likely threaten to get divorced."

A cloud of melancholy flashed across Zhang Wenli's eyes, as if a sudden ray of hope had diminished as soon as it arose. Xie Lanshan and Shen Liufei exchanged a glance; despite how well the man hid his emotions, they'd caught this unnatural expression.

Xie Lanshan asked, "Huh, is Mrs. Li unhappy with returning the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* back to its home country?"

Qin Ke instead questioned him back, “If this truly is the original, it’s worth billions of yuan; would you be willing to donate something like that?”

Xie Lanshan narrowed his eyes and seriously considered the answer to this question. “If it’s this particular painting, then yes, but if it was something else, I probably wouldn’t.” He then gave Shen Liufei a casual glance. “Which reminds me, someone once said he was going to draw a portrait of me. It sounded like he was ready to start, but why haven’t I seen anything yet?”

Qin Ke thought he was joking. “What kind of artwork nowadays could possibly be worth more than an original piece of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*? Mrs. Li is still quite young and will understand eventually. This isn’t simply a generous donation. This is also a symbolic return of a treasure back to its homeland, and that act of service is no less significant than the value of the painting.”

Tao Longyue only processed the first half of the sentence. “Mr. Li looks to be almost seventy already—how could his wife still be young?”

“She’s not his first wife; he remarried only about a year ago.” Qin Ke smiled. “Mrs. Li is actually two years younger than me.”

Qin Ke appeared to be only a college graduate, which meant Li Guochang’s new American wife certainly had a large age gap with her husband.

Tao Longyue was quite sensitive in his area of expertise. “If it really is such a valuable national treasure, and has returned for the first time in decades, as you said, why didn’t they make the exhibit at the National Museum instead? For something on a scale as big as this that could attract people nationwide, why did they decide to host the exhibit in a private museum here?”

“Because this was a last-minute decision. The National Museum plans out their exhibitions two years ahead of time, so it was very difficult to fit in such a sudden exhibition on such short notice. We also only heard Mr. Li was planning on returning to China about six months ago. After discussion with the team, we decided to honor Mr. Li’s rush to return the painting and worked hard to make time and space to host this exhibition last minute.” Zhang Wenli was quite generous in explaining the situation. “Besides, we still don’t know whether or not this is a copy or the original. Mr. Li insisted on putting it up on display first before donating the painting. When the experts from the National Museum visit, they’ll easily be able to tell whether it’s a copy or the original.”

“Regardless, since you’ve all decided to host, we must maintain proper security during the event.” Tao Longyue wasn’t too pleased. The last time they’d attempted to check surveillance at the museum when searching for the culprit who tried to frame Shen Liufei, he noticed the museum lacked a proper system. “The cameras installed here are too old and have too many blind spots.”

Zhang Wenli explained, “The heart of the Crane Museum is to be one with nature. As you can see, the entire structure is surrounded by trees; the interior of the museum is also made mostly out of wood. The design is focused on irregular geometric shapes. Blind spots in surveillance are inevitable. Besides, infrared cameras have much brighter lights than normal cameras. The museum is filled with valuable collections, and if a fire were to occur, the result would be devastating.”

Qin Ke added, “But the West Hall hosting the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*, along with other famous pieces, has been temporarily installed with ten additional infrared cameras. The entire security system in that area operates independently from the rest of the museum with its own energy source, so even in cases of emergencies, the cameras will continue to record.”

Zhang Wenli smiled. “Of course. There we have nothing to fear even if the power goes off. The museum has its own emergency energy supply. It will only take five minutes maximum before the power comes back. Also, our security guards will be thoroughly checking every corner of the exhibit during these times; if anything strange occurs, they will contact the police immediately.”

Xie Lanshan looked around cautiously. “There seem to be quite a few fresh faces.”

Zhang Wenli nodded. “They’re all newly hired. The return of a national treasure shook the whole country. There may not be enough people on the original security team to watch over everything. When we received the news Mr. Li was coming back, we immediately hired new security guards. We did very thorough psychological tests and training to ensure once the painting enters the museum, it will be under strict surveillance and protection twenty-four seven. Every corner of the museum, especially restrooms and places behind large decorations, were key points of inspection.”

Outside of the museum, a group of patrolling police dogs worked seamlessly with the guards inside, forming the typical quadruple security against burglary: human guards, physical obstacles, technology, and canines. Zhang Wenli swore with confidence: the entire museum was well prepared for this exhibition, and the security was on par with the National Museum.

It certainly sounded like a flawless plan.

No new findings pertained to a potential case during this trip. By the time dusk arrived, Tao Longyue and Xie Lanshan walked out the hallway toward the main gate. A voice suddenly called out from behind them. “I’ll take you home.”

Xie Lanshan turned. Tao Longyue cleared his throat awkwardly, as if to warn his friend.

“You rode your bike?” Xie Lanshan didn’t want to reject the offer but was still a bit hesitant, especially after his horrific traffic accident. His head had just healed, and he might not be ready to take a ride with the man’s wild driving. Besides, riding on a bike seated behind someone else while in front of others wasn’t particularly sightly.

“I drove my car.” Understanding the concern, Shen Liufei teased the man. “Are you scared?”

“No, maybe next time,” Xie Lanshan said after putting some thought into it. “I’ve skipped out on my therapist multiple times already, so I have to go see her today.”

“All right.” Shen Liufei didn’t force him either and nodded before walking away.

Shen Liufei’s fitted suit made him look like a well-educated gentleman, which was entirely different from what he had seemed at the boxing bar. Xie Lanshan had a sudden urge to say something but didn’t, only watching the man’s silhouette walk farther away into the sunset.

Tao Longyue nudged himself over. “I’ll give you a ride then. I haven’t seen Qilian in a while either.”

Giving him a look of disgust, Xie Lanshan walked away. “No thanks.”

“But why?”

“Your car’s too ugly.”

(iv)

Someone had already arrived at Song Qilian’s office before him. Liu Mingfang was inside the office; they were arguing. Liu Mingfang grabbed Song Qilian’s wrist with another hand up in the air, ready to slap her.

Without hesitation, Xie Lanshan pulled out his gun. “Let go of her.”

At the sudden sound behind him, Liu Mingfang jumped and turned his head. Yet the man still grabbed Song Qilian’s wrist, responding in a hateful voice, “I’m disciplining my wife here. It’s none of your business.”

Tired of correcting him, Xie Lanshan kept his gun pointed at Liu Mingfang. “You’ve seen the news already. I got rid of a bastard that liked to ‘discipline his wife’ once. I don’t mind getting rid of a second.”

“You dare pull that trigger? Did you forget the uproar you caused last time?” Liu Mingfang was convinced the cop before him was all bark and refused to back down, instead raising his voice even more. “I can sue you. Just wait till you lose your damn house!”

“I didn’t forget, but fuck that. I’ve always hated your guts.” Xie Lanshan shrugged. “Besides, that only happened last time because the wife decided to betray me last minute, so take a wild guess now; whose side would Qilian be

on?”

Liu Mingfang didn’t even need to ask. They’d lived together for six years. The woman had always spent her time looking far off into the distance and sitting quietly to fiddle with that wooden carving. Speaking to her was like speaking to a dead tree; she couldn’t hear anything, nor would she ever respond. Liu Mingfang knew who had gifted her the wooden figurine, and it had always fueled his inferiority complex and anger.

A relationship without proper maintenance or purpose could not last, and when theirs finally reached its end, it was too rotten to be repaired.

Because of their family connections from a generation before, Liu Mingfang had also known Xie Lanshan since they were little, and had often bullied him along with Tao Longyue. Xie Lanshan held no grudges. No one knew whether he was a coward or truly didn’t care; either way, the man had never taken many things personally.

But this Xie Lanshan standing in front of him right now was different. Half of the man’s face fell into the shadows of the office, which covered his expression. His gaze was icy and almost insane. He looked nothing like normal.

Xie Lanshan curled up his lips slightly; his gaze grew deeper as his finger pressed into the trigger. “Apologize to Miss Song and get your ass out of here.”

Liu Mingfang refused to apologize but finally let the woman go, then exited the room in anger. As the fuming man walked by, Xie Lanshan stuck a leg out and casually tripped him. Liu Mingfang didn’t notice and fell right onto his face. Seeing her ex-husband’s unsightly and casual fall, like a dog eating off the floor, was too much. Even Song Qilian couldn’t help but laugh.

“Just you wait!” Liu Mingfang pulled himself back up and slammed the door shut. Burning in rage, Liu Mingfang didn’t realize something had fallen out of his bag by the corner of the table.

Xie Lanshan picked up the strange object. It was a small digital timer less than half the size of a palm, perfectly travel-sized, and modified to short-circuit on a delay. Xie Lanshan played around with the small device; a cop’s intuition told him Liu Mingfang planned on using this to do something shady.

Song Qilian noticed the man falling into a daze and shifted her gaze to the gun in his hand. “Are you not going to put your weapon away?”

“Even cops can’t carry guns around that easily all the time.” Xie Lanshan smiled and handed the gun over to Song Qilian. The doctor didn’t dare to pick it up, but the man insisted. “It’s all right. Touch it.”

Song Qilian realized it was much lighter than expected and actually plastic made to look real. There weren’t even BB bullets loaded inside—it was obviously a toy.

“For your son.” After successfully fooling Liu Mingfang, Xie Lanshan seemed to be in good spirits. He sat in the chair. “If he troubles you again, I swear I’ll kill him.”

He closed his eyes as if ready to sleep, but the corner of his lips still curled up. He lay on the patient’s chair casually with the backdrop of the cityscape behind him. As night fell, lights began to glitter in the dark. Song Qilian remembered the Xie Lanshan she knew from the past, the young man who had only shown a boundless love for the mortal world. It sounded almost like a complaint, but it was reality. “You’ve changed.” Because they came from Song Qilian, these words had the power to reach Xie Lanshan’s heart.

Ever since Xiao Liang asked him to go seek Shen Liufei’s help, the man’s name seemed to have been stuck in his head. Yet the more he thought about the man, the more he grew wary and anxious. He had begun to subconsciously avoid his new colleague as if he had something to hide.

Xie Lanshan might have hated therapists with his entire being, but Song Qilian was the one exception.

Outside the window, it was night and the lights from the buildings were like little sparks of flame dancing in the sky. As Sui Hong had requested, Song Qilian listened carefully. She didn’t treat him like a patient, instead giving him the reception of an old friend.

“I’ve survived gunfights and killed people. I’ve always believed my actions were for the sake of stopping crime, and that even under extreme circumstances I would never kill an innocent person, but...” Xie Lanshan’s words were calm, not prideful or arrogant. He only lightly glossed over the difficulties of acting the role of a drug dealer, the horrifying scenes an undercover officer had to witness, even the dangers of living through bloody battlefields, leaving Song Qilian to fathom the traumatic experiences for herself.

After a long and sincere confession, he finally admitted to Song Qilian, “I’m worried this isn’t the truth. I may have killed someone while I was undercover; not just anyone, but a good person, an innocent human being.”

Song Qilian was surprised. “Why?”

“After I shot down that man with a knife a few months ago, I started having vivid nightmares about a woman. I saw myself killing her, drowning her in a bathtub... her face is always blurry, but I managed to see it clearly for the first time after the car accident. And now I’m convinced she is a real person.” Xie Lanshan turned to look at Song Qilian, hesitating. It took him a while. “Is it... is it possible I’ve killed her and forgotten about her out of guilt? Like a form of selective amnesia?” Xie Lanshan had his theories about the woman in the white dress haunting his dreams. He once typed the words “psychogenic amnesia” into the search bar on his laptop out of suspicion, but the six years of

undercover life living every day on the edge had made it seem nearly impossible for such a small episode to create such a lasting impact.

Song Qilian answered with a question. “So you believe you couldn’t withstand the shock of killing an innocent woman and selectively chose to hide away from this memory?”

Xie Lanshan let out a bitter laugh. “Is that not possible?”

“It is, but I’m sure it wouldn’t happen to you,” Song Qilian said firmly. “You’re the kindest and gentlest person I’ve ever known. The strongest person too, one who can shoulder anything with immense courage. Even in the face of the most traumatic experiences one could go through or even after witnessing the ugliest parts of human nature, you would never voluntarily turn your back. You can search for the answer and the truth; find out who the person in your dream is. I’m sure she isn’t who you think.”

Xie Lanshan stood up from the chair, silently looking into Song Qilian’s eyes. He opened his mouth. “I don’t think I’ll be able to find the answer on my own.”

“Then find someone to help you, someone you trust and someone who trusts you equally; someone you’ve known for many years and who can cooperate with you in every aspect...”

A gentle look in his eyes, Xie Lanshan walked toward Song Qilian, who smiled as tears welled up in her eyes. She prepared herself to listen to the man’s confession—of course she assumed the person he’d trust had to be herself.

Yet Xie Lanshan suddenly gave her a firm but quick peck on the cheek. “Thank you.”

Before Song Qilian could react, Xie Lanshan had walked out of the office.

After the man left, Song Qilian laughed at her own conceit and sat back down at her desk, then pulled out a wooden figurine from a drawer. The bridesmaid had secretly handed it to her on the day of her wedding in the dressing room, telling her a handsome and tall young man wanted to gift it to the bride.

Blood, long since dried out and now permanent, covered it like a layer of rust. The features weren’t that similar to the woman it was based on, but upon first glance, the subject was clear.

Song Qilian’s fingers traced over the wooden figure, recalling a young Xie Lanshan from a decade ago. Back then, Liu Mingfang and Tao Longyue were still the big bullies in school. They would toss paper shreds on Xie Lanshan’s head, throw paper balls at the boy when he was called up to answer questions in class, and even slandered his father’s heroic deeds to get a reaction and piss the boy off, but Xie Lanshan had remained unfazed. He would simply sweep

the scrap paper away, stare quietly at the blackboard even if he didn't know how to answer, and apologize to the teacher.

Even Song Qilian couldn't stand watching the boy get bullied and had urged him multiple times to defend himself. Xie Lanshan practiced martial arts when he was bored, so he could break a few bones if he did get into a fight.

But Xie Lanshan refused. "I'm not mad. Why should I fight back?"

Song Qilian used to be frustrated. No matter how tranquil the surface of a pond was, one should still be able to create ripples and hear some noise after tossing pebbles and rocks into it.

Many years later, she realized she was wrong; the man was far deeper and wider than a pond.

He was the ocean.

Something prickled at her heart. A sour taste built up in her mouth; tears were ready to roll down her face.

Perhaps this person she had known since they were twelve meant more to her than she realized. She had once depended on him, yearned for him, suspected him, blamed him... yet despite these mixed emotions, her feelings for him never changed. She wanted to correct her past mistakes and start over.

Xie Lanshan made a decision the moment he stepped out of the clinic. Rather than saying he was scared of Shen Liufei, it was more accurate to say that he was afraid of himself. He was afraid Shen Liufei's brush tips would reveal some horrifying truth. He decided to treat the blurry fragment of memory as a wound; he was afraid to open the injury further and face the sanguine truth again. Yet, as he spoke to Song Qilian, the fear suddenly disappeared as though he were waking from a lucid dream.

Night had fallen, but Xie Lanshan pulled out his cell phone and gave Shen Liufei a call.

"Hey, cuz, I want a date with you." Xie Lanshan continued without giving the other an option to reject or negotiate. "I'll take half a day off on Friday, so come get me at 12 P.M. in front of the bureau."

Shen Liufei's calm voice rang out in response to the man who had just refused a ride from him less than two hours ago, "Suddenly changing your mind now?"

"Just pretend I was playing hard to get earlier. Are you down?" Xie Lanshan didn't give up and instead attempted to provoke the man to join him. "I'm a coward who can only resort to tricks and I hold grudges when I'm wronged, but my dear cousin, you're not the same kind of stingy bastard as me, right?"

He made it sound like he would keep receipts if he wasn't picked up on Friday at the scheduled time; Shen Liufei laughed a little. "Sure."

"So you agree?" Xie Lanshan's spirits lifted. "Then I'll see you on Friday."

"See you then."

As soon as they hung up, Xie Lanshan recalled Song Qilian's words. He'd barely known Shen Liufei two months, but this strange sense of affinity and familiarity was real.

"Feels like..." Xie Lanshan mumbled these two words to himself, and something warm and fuzzy filled his heart. He bit down on his tongue to take his mind off it.

The last hint of sunlight created a colorful backdrop on the cityscape, making the skyscrapers resemble treasures hiding from the blinding glare. He took a step forward that gradually became a jog; a newfound energy, one that was passionate and burning, lifted his mood.

Before he could make it back to the main gate of his residential area, a familiar face walked out from the gate. Xie Lanshan called out, "Secretary Qin."

Qin Ke turned his head, then responded in surprise, "Officer Xie? You live here?"

"It's an old house but thankfully quiet enough to live in. Where do you live, Mr. Secretary?"

Qin Ke laughed. "You can call me Qin Ke. I'm currently staying at a hotel near this place. I was too caught up with work this time around because the exhibition is scheduled to open in two days. I wanted to visit a friend while I'm free, but it seems like I had the wrong address."

Out of instinct, Xie Lanshan offered, "Do you need me to help?"

Qin Ke pulled out his phone and looked at the screen. A message seemed to have appeared, as he shook his head. He then laughed bitterly. "No thanks, my boss can't seem to live without me. Isn't he needy? He just texted me to buy some hypertension meds for him."

"That's part of your job too? Didn't his wife follow him back this time?"

Qin Ke smiled. "She did, but an American who isn't familiar with the culture here wouldn't know where to buy these things. Besides, she's also here to visit a friend. I heard she's pretty close to that agent, Mr. Liu, and would often try to talk her husband into selling that painting—"

Qin Ke stopped abruptly, as if realizing he said something he probably shouldn't have. An awkward and apologetic smile formed on his face and he bid Xie Lanshan farewell.

(v)

Friday, Shen Liufei arrived to pick Xie Lanshan up as promised. The young cop had a cigarette in his mouth and his hands in his pockets as he leaned by the gate of the municipal bureau and waited for his ride under the burning sun. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and smiled. “You’re finally here.”

Shen Liufei didn’t have a habit of being late; he checked the time. Five minutes earlier than their scheduled 12 P.M. He reached to open the door for Xie Lanshan. “You’re too eager.”

“I just miss you.” Xie Lanshan tossed the cigarette butt and got in the car. The smile on his face grew wider. “I haven’t seen you in a day. I missed you like a flower yearning for water.”

Over the last few weeks, the two had grown used to each other’s personalities; Xie Lanshan might enjoy smooth-talking, but he stuck strictly to speech only. Shen Liufei didn’t respond to the teasing. “Where are we going?”

Xie Lanshan gave him a mysterious grin. “Ximen Port. We’re taking a boat to an island.”

As the car engine started, Tao Longyue came out suddenly and yelled from behind, “You need to come back tonight! Tomorrow is the grand opening of the Impressions of China exhibition, and we need to be there to work with security—you hear me?!”

Xie Lanshan simply stretched a hand out the window of the passenger side to give him a thumbs-up.

Shen Liufei could never have imagined he would be asked to drive an hour to the beach, then ride on a boat for half an hour only to be dragged to a small island. Weirdos certainly had eccentric tastes; while normal people took their dates to bars, restaurants, or theaters, this man wanted to take his to a psych ward.

Xie Lanshan was familiar with the staff. After filling out a form at the reception desk and chatting with the nurses, he called out to Shen Liufei, “We’re ready.”

Expressionless and quiet as usual, Shen Liufei followed Xie Lanshan and a doctor inside the hospital. Xie Lanshan peeked at him from the corner of his eye and laughed in his mind; he knew the man was baffled but refused to ask questions. “A future in-law will need to meet the family at some point anyway. I can’t really take you to see my dad, so I decided to let you meet my mom instead.”

It was Shen Liufei’s turn to be startled; he knew Xie Lanshan’s mother suffered from severe mental illness.

It was the time for outdoor activities. A nurse rolled out a wheelchair into the gardens. In the wheelchair sat a cleanly dressed middle-aged woman with

almost completely white hair, as if age had taken a toll on her already. Yet her skin was smooth and her features soft, making her appear much younger than her age. Shen Liufei had seen many beauties, but someone with such a unique facial structure was rare. His instincts told him this must be Xie Lanshan's mother.

Earlier, Xie Lanshan had been joking with Shen Liufei with a teasing grin, but his expression softened the moment he saw his mother.

According to the doctor, this woman had recently snuck away from the medical staff in the facility and jumped off a building in search of her son. The doctor frantically apologized to Xie Lanshan. "It was ultimately our mistake for not being careful. We completely underestimated the desperation of a mother who misses her son."

The minor injuries on her feet were almost fully healed. Xie Lanshan didn't blame the nurses for the incident, as he was only concerned with seeing his mother. He walked up toward the woman and kneeled before her, calling out softly, "Mom."

The woman lifted her face and stared at Xie Lanshan, but her expression remained detached.

The nurse behind her attempted to give a reminder. "Miss, look, it's your son."

The woman narrowed her eyes; the cloud of dissociation cleared as if she had finally recognized him. She lifted her shaking hand toward Xie Lanshan's cheek.

Suddenly, the woman slapped him hard on the face and screeched, "This isn't my son, this isn't my son!"

This sudden change in attitude took everyone by surprise. The woman's wails echoed throughout the entire garden. She had a beautiful name, Zhuyin, which meant *the sounds of pearls*; it reflected her clear and lovely voice, yet the sounds coming out of her throat right now were anything but pleasant, like metal plates grinding.

Gao Zhuyin was completely mad. She not only screeched but even attempted to struggle out of her wheelchair and beat up her own son. Xie Lanshan kneeled silently on the ground with his head lowered; the fringes of his hair covered his eyes. To everyone's shock and bafflement, he allowed his mother to deliriously hit his shoulders and slap his face. He didn't care. As a son, dealing with discipline from his own mother was natural, but his expression was grave and heavy. He was clearly worn out and scarred.

At Shen Liufei's prompting, a doctor walked up to stop the woman. He pointed at Shen Liufei. "This person can help you find your son."

Gao Zhuyin might not remember her own son, but she recognized her primary doctor. She seemed to believe in the doctor's words and turned to

grab Shen Liufei's hand, crying, "Where's my son? My son is missing..."

"No need to rush." Shen Liufei kneeled before the older woman's wheelchair and consoled her softly, "I can help you find him."

After standing like a paralyzed man, Xie Lanshan decided to give his spot up to Shen Liufei and quietly removed himself. A few other people standing around them gave him looks of pity. The scene of a mother not recognizing her own son was brutally heartbreaking to witness.

The medical staff panicked upon noticing the clear handprints on Xie Lanshan's face. They frantically explained they had taken good care of the older woman. She had been stable for the past few days, and no one had expected her to lose her mind the moment she saw her son.

Xie Lanshan didn't have any intention to scold them.

Shen Liufei asked the nurse to give him a pencil and paper. To Gao Zhuyin, he said, "What does your son look like? Let me draw him and help you search for him."

Gao Zhuyin reached out a hand. She was overly thin, so her bones were visible near her joints, making her look sicklier. She gestured around the tip of the man's shoulders as he kneeled on the ground, then spoke through her trembling lips, "My son is about this tall... he went to school and never came back..."

The woman's memory seemed to have stopped when her son was still young, when her husband was still alive, when the family was still a peaceful household of three.

"What do his eyes look like? Is it about this big, double eyelid? Like him?" Shen Liufei guided Gao Zhuyin's gaze toward Xie Lanshan, who had already distanced himself.

As his mother's gaze fell on him, Xie Lanshan felt dismay.

"A little bit, but also completely different." Gao Zhuyin turned her head coldly after a brief scan. "My son is more handsome. All of the girls in his class like him..."

Shen Liufei displayed ample patience, acceptance, and kindness. His gaze shifted between the paper in his hands and the eyes of the woman as she spoke. With her hands on Shen Liufei, Gao Zhuyin rambled on about Xie Lanshan's childhood, relieved to finally find a listener to follow her back down her blissful memory lane. The woman said her son didn't like to study and would always copy his female classmate's tests in class; he was very athletic and would always win first place in any sports event he signed up for...

While Gao Zhuyin spoke, Shen Liufei finished the draft of his first portrait. A quick sketch was a piece of cake for a professional forensic sketch artist. Xie Lanshan caught a glimpse from afar; it was him when he was twelve. A young boy wearing a school uniform and a red bandana around his neck. The

boy on the paper stood quietly and still; a mature air made him seem more sophisticated than others of his age.

Shen Liufei drew a few more portraits, all of a young Xie Lanshan as depicted by the tales from Gao Zhuyin. As the older woman picked up these drawings, tears and laughter intermingled on her face. “It’s my son, my Lanshan...”

A nurse came in at this time and reminded Gao Zhuyin to take her medicine. The woman quickly forgot about finding her missing son.

Some nurses would occasionally put on a small performance for their patients on a piano in the patient resting area. Shen Liufei took one of the drawings and offered to help the woman find her son with it, then gave the rest of the sketches to her. He walked toward the grand piano and took a seat. After propping up the lid, he began to play a serene and wistful melody that could make the audience cry.

Xie Lanshan’s gaze was locked on his mother now staring fondly at Shen Liufei playing the piano. Her head bobbed around along with the melody while she clapped eagerly to show her support. She held the images of her young son tightly; the silver hair on her head glowed under the sunlight while her pink cheeks brightened.

This looked like a scene from a movie or dream, and in this scene, this dreamscape, she lived joyfully like a young woman.

Occasionally during his performance, Shen Liufei lifted his head and sought Xie Lanshan among the crowd. The young cop was crying, tears rolling down as his eyes filled with complicated emotions.

He hadn’t cried like this in a long time, in silence but also relief, as if years of anguish and struggles inside him had finally found an outlet to be released and consoled.

Noticing Shen Liufei’s gaze, Xie Lanshan turned his head to face the artist. The two men exchanged glances briefly under the sunset and smiled.

When a sudden typhoon arrived, the sky darkened within the blink of an eye. It was quick to blow past the island, but the violent winds quickly summoned waves. Boats could not sail out, and the two men were now stuck. They sat on the bench in the garden of the hospital while all the patients were sent back, leaving only a shivering old tree under the storm. The two sat silently for a long while, watching the curtain of raindrops fall to earth as if someone was pouring water from an open faucet.

Black rain clouds muddied the sky. The skyline was invisible unless one focused in between the gaps of the thick clouds.

Shen Liufei didn’t smoke but still carried a pack of foreign-brand cigarettes. The small box was a royal blue color and gave off a strong mint

smell even through the packaging.

Xie Lanshan hadn't been in the mood to smoke lately. After extended periods dealing with Tao Longyue's cheap tobacco, he even considered quitting. He took out a cigarette slowly and sniffed; his eyes glistened. "Not bad."

This man seemed to have completely grasped his taste in wine and tobacco.

Xie Lanshan reached a hand into his pocket and noticed it was empty. He must have lost his lighter during the episode earlier, but Shen Liufei came well prepared with one of his own. The man courteously lit the cigarette for Xie Lanshan.

The fresh minty taste in his mouth lifted Xie Lanshan's mood. "You don't want one?"

Shen Liufei shook his head. "No."

Xie Lanshan didn't believe him. "You got a pack of cigs and a lighter in your pocket."

"I used to smoke but quit."

Xie Lanshan thought about it briefly; this might sound strange if it was anyone else, but it was an acceptable answer for Shen Liufei. The man could go from a gentleman one second to a wild fighter the next, as if multiple personalities lived inside his body.

As he smoked, Xie Lanshan took a peek at the portrait Shen Liufei had kept. The young boy wasn't particularly pretty—austere at best, and almost disappointingly bland and average. Xie Lanshan's spirits lifted. "See how silly I looked back then."

Shen Liufei took the portrait back and studied his own drawing, then he held the paper up right next to Xie Lanshan's face and compared the two. "You look sillier now."

"I may be a fool, but people still love me." Xie Lanshan lifted an eyebrow playfully at Shen Liufei. "If you aren't secretly in love with me, how do you explain how you know what I looked like when I was a kid?" The man was a professional forensic sketch artist, true, but Gao Zhuyin's words were jumbled. Drawing a portrait from her unreliable descriptions would be impossible.

"I found them in public security records," Shen Liufei admitted. "I do have a right to know, at the very least, where this stranger who keeps insisting we're cousins came from."

"So what's he like?"

Shen Liufei pondered momentarily. "He's a good person."

Xie Lanshan snorted a laugh. Another wave of rain poured down from the sky, drenching the corners of their trousers.

Shen Liufei asked, "Your mother's illness... how did it become so serious?"

Xie Lanshan took a while to respond. He lowered his gaze and answered softly, “I wasn’t around her during those two years when her mental stability was at its worst.”

The words sounded nonchalant, but Shen Liufei knew Xie Lanshan hadn’t even been in the country. The man had been busy during the prime time of the Golden Triangle’s power always acting for the greater good and walking a fine line between life and death.

“Her condition was stable by the time I was assigned to the mission. I also only learned after I returned how her condition had changed for the worse, and now she can’t even recognize me. According to the doctor, the shock of her own son following the footsteps of her deceased husband and dying on duty triggered her trauma and made her completely lose her mind.” With a derisive laugh, Xie Lanshan shoved the cigarette back into his mouth and took in a deep drag.

His mother would be a lifetime regret.

“It’s way past the last ship of the day. Looks like we’ll have to spend the night on the island.” Shen Liufei looked at the time. “Did Captain Tao have work for you?”

“Can’t help it even if he does. The heavens made a choice. We’ll take the next boat tomorrow morning.” Xie Lanshan stood and turned toward Shen Liufei, his gaze locked on the man’s cold eyes. “I have to thank you, though. I’ve never seen my mother so happy since she fell ill.” He pointed up into the sky. “You don’t like roses. What about that flower on the eaves?”

Then, as if he had also gone mad, Xie Lanshan took off his shoes and ran barefoot into the flower garden, skillfully climbed up the two-story, short Chinese building, and plucked a small red flower, placing it in his mouth.

It resembled a begonia or peach flower, but its colors were more vibrant than the former and clearer than the latter. Perhaps a unique species had been blown onto the island by the winds, growing stubbornly on foreign land all by itself without its kind.

Xie Lanshan returned to the ground, yet he didn’t rush to find shelter under the rain and instead lifted his head and spread his arms out, allowing the drops to fall onto his body.

Artists all have an appreciation for beautiful things. Shen Liufei’s gaze remained locked on Xie Lanshan the whole time, wondering if the beauty of the flower or the man had captivated him.

The place Gao Zhuyin now stayed in was peaceful and isolated without many visitors, so even the hostels had very few guest rooms. Xie Lanshan requested a room with a single large bed, offering to share space.

After showering, the two men felt the fatigue of the day's travel catch up to them and got into bed at the same time. They slept back-to-back at first, until Xie Lanshan suddenly turned around just as Shen Liufei was about to fall asleep and wrapped the latter in his arms. His already scorching hot body seemed desperate for more warmth, gluing tightly to Shen Liufei's back.

Shen Liufei almost laughed, assuming the man behind him was doing it on purpose to tease him. The madness in Officer Xie was unlike any proper police officer. With such an honorable and meritorious job, and skin thick enough to block any evil around him, how could he still possibly show such vulnerability so easily?

But saying that little red flower from earlier didn't touch Shen Liufei's heart in the slightest would be a lie. The flower was now inside a glass cup resting by the window.

With this warmth inside him, Shen Liufei also turned around and returned the embrace. Their skin touched gently in the dark while they fell deep into slumber.

(vi)

The typhoon made its way to the nearby coastal city. Xie Lanshan's boat could not sail in this weather, and the entire Hanhai City district was quickly tossed into a whirlwind of violent storms.

During this restless Friday night at 8:30 P.M. the Crane Museum's power went off with a *click*.

Thankfully, as the owner Zhang Wenli had said, within five minutes, the backup power source kicked in. As for the surveillance room, its own independent energy system was completely unaffected.

The West Hall, housing numerous paintings and artifacts in storage, was closed off and armed with infrared surveillance cameras all around. From the surveillance side, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The East Hall was open to the public and only had normal cameras. Due to the lack of interior lighting during the blackout, the surveillance recording was pitch-black for about five seconds.

Everything was normal.

According to the technician fixing the power, the typhoon caused a temporary trip in the wires, but Old Qi, the head of the security department, wasn't convinced. The exhibit was scheduled to open the next day, and the power going off at a time like this was too convenient. In order to ensure the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* and other valuable artifacts in the museum were unharmed, he called the police almost immediately after the power came back.

In accordance with the museum's security protocol, he needed to survey the museum with his own team before the police arrived.

The newly recruited security guards were split into small groups of two to check both the East and West Halls to ensure nothing was damaged or missing. The Crane Museum, a privately owned establishment, normally didn't have this many guards. Of the twenty-something guards on duty, over half were freshly hired as of two weeks ago. Security staff member Xiao Zhou was among them. He held a flashlight in one hand and followed his team's leader to scout one of the side rooms in the East Hall.

The natural light inside the museum was not adequate to navigate without a flashlight. Nothing but wax statues and sculptures filled the East Hall. It wasn't a highly protected area, so the team only sent two guards.

Xiao Zhou was displeased with the extra hours. "Didn't we check the cams already? Nothing's wrong."

"The higher-ups specifically requested us to check in person if anything out of the ordinary happens. Especially now, when the exhibit is scheduled to open tomorrow. Millions of people are waiting to see this painting." Captain Qi was a retired veteran who grew up with a strong sense of self-discipline and duty. Even after reaching forty, his physique was still fit and tough for his age.

"Hey, old man, I heard people died in this museum before. Is that true?"

"Don't listen to those rumors." As he focused on checking the surroundings, Old Qi had no spare moment to chat about rumors. "This isn't the scene of the crime. Someone just cut off the hands of a female corpse and tossed them into the men's restroom here."

"Tossed... tossed where?" Xiao Zhou stuttered.

"There," Old Qi joked. Cong Ying's hands were tossed on the second floor, but he attempted to scare Xiao Zhou with a little white lie. "That restroom behind you!"

Xiao Zhou screamed and turned away.

"Look at yourself—how can a man like you be so terrified of something so minor?" Old Qi shot his new recruit a glance. Xiao Zhou was a young man of about twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old, and around 176 centimeters tall. His features were thin and small, and his skin was still littered with acne scars. He couldn't be considered ugly, but he wasn't exceptionally pretty; he was as plain as any average person on the street can get.

Old Qi inspected the restroom, which he had checked earlier in the day before the closing of the museum. However, they needed to check it once more after the blackout. The lights weren't bright, so he scanned every corner of the restroom carefully with the flashlight.

The outermost door creaked when slowly pushed open—no one was inside. Old Qi took a few steps forward and opened another door. Again, no one.

"Oh dear, they even cut off the hands..." Xiao Zhou anxiously gulped. "That's considered a torturous murder, and ghosts from these kinds of murders are always the most hateful. They will definitely come back and haunt us from the underworld."

Old Qi, not a superstitious man, was particularly peeved, so he quickly scolded the younger guard, "The culprit was the victim's boyfriend and was already arrested. He's going to be put to the guillotine soon, so even if there are hauntings, we're too far down on her hit list. We security guards only need to focus on our duties!"

Outside, a rough gust of wind snapped a tree branch and blew it into the window of the restroom. The bough ground against the glass like someone gently knocking on the window in darkness—like a ghostly, twisted hand with long and thin nails.

After confirming the restroom was deserted, Old Qi took Xiao Zhou to the wax figure exhibition area. It was only a two- to three-minute walk, but the constant winds and rain outside knocked on the poor young security guard's heart. He quietly prayed under his breath.

He could certainly blame himself for watching too many horror films; Xiao Zhou thought about the pair of burnt hands cut off from a corpse, and could almost smell the flesh. The image of a horrifying ghost consumed his thoughts.

Looking at the wax figures before him, all donned in elegant headpieces and airy clothing, the fear intensified. The facial features looked ghastlier at this time of night, almost as if he was facing a real ghost.

"Do you even know how tight our museum's security is right now? No need to be scared of ghosts. The cops are comin' soon." Old Qi didn't believe in curses, but Xiao Zhou's constant nagging annoyed him; he subconsciously sped up and walked forward on his own.

Lifting his head, he met a pair of eyes above him, catching the old man off guard—these wax figures were way too realistic! The ethereal beauties with colorful makeup were nothing but creepy illuminated by dim lighting inside the Crane Museum during the stormy night.

No windows lined this area, which didn't ease the horrifying atmosphere. Goosebumps prickling, Xiao Zhou scanned the wax figures and his blood ran cold. Suddenly, a white figure swung by him. Xiao Zhou wasn't sure if it was just his imagination or the flashlight, but one of the wax figures turned its eyes, yet by the time he could inspect it, he found nothing out of the ordinary.

At this point, he was ready to wet his pants and quickly grabbed Old Qi's arm. "Boss Qi, there's nobody here. Let's get out of this place."

But the old man was still experienced. His focus wasn't on those wax figures, but instead on the heavenly backdrops. He inspected the back of the cloud boats and lotus flowers—spaces that could hide a person.

Almost as soon as they finished checking every corner of the exhibition hall and confirmed no one suspicious was hiding on-site, Tao Longyue called the museum.

In order to protect the painting, Captain Tao had been on standby twenty-four seven, but that spoiled cop Xie Lanshan still hadn't returned.

The bastard sure ain't shameless about putting hoes before bros! Tao Longyue cursed Xie Lanshan in his mind as he made his phone call to Captain Qi. Bringing Xiao Liang with him, he took another walk around the museum after they finished checking the wax figures.

They made their way to the West Hall. A grandiose copper sword, frightening terra-cotta generals, the artful and bold calligraphy left by scholars of the past—everything was taken out for public view. The empty museum was like a massive coffin filled with tranquil antiques carrying millennia of history in solidarity. Even Xiao Liang felt chills down his spine in this atmosphere. "Captain Tao, you know how they say that antiques have spirits in them? Don't you feel this place is a bit creepy..."

Captain Tao firmly scolded him back, "You're an officer who subscribes to no religion. Don't think about all that weird supernatural stuff."

"Tao... Captain Tao, you entered the public security forces earlier than me. Can't you set an example and stop grabbing onto my arm..."

Xiao Liang looked at Tao Longyue's hands, which firmly grabbed his bicep.

"Uh..." Tao Longyue removed his hand and made a show of fixing his clothing. "Look, I'm just worried *you* might get scared..."

By this time, the security guards tasked to patrol the West Hall met up with their boss, confirming the entire museum had been cleared. No suspicious persons had been found in any corner.

Tao Longyue hadn't made his way to the main exhibition area of the painting. "Where's the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*?"

A security guard answered, "That's being kept securely inside a bulletproof glass display. There are only two keys to the display: one is in the hands of the owner, Zhang Wenli, and the other is with Mr. Li Guochang."

The security in the Crane Museum was thorough. Tao Longyue decided that the security guards might not feel comfortable with him around too long and decided to drive out to patrol the surrounding area.

At around 10 P.M., two people arrived.

The first to enter was a tall white woman with a model's body. She was blonde with blue eyes and pinkish-white skin. She spoke fast but only in English; most staff present couldn't understand a single word she said.

The white woman's name was Evelyn, and she was Li Guochang's current wife. She said her husband had been convinced about not donating the painting but changed his mind again after receiving a strange phone call. Now the man was missing and wouldn't answer his phone, so she'd come to the museum to find him.

Xiao Zhou knew basic conversational English and was asked to translate. Even Old Qi didn't have the power to allow any unauthorized persons in. Besides, he also hadn't seen Li Guochang show up today, so protecting the safety of the national treasure was his duty, whether he was up against someone's wife or an evil spirit. Xiao Zhou's job was to convince the woman to leave with his poor English, but in the eyes of everyone else, the two didn't seem to be communicating.

At first, Evelyn refused to leave, but after realizing she couldn't fight the stubborn and buff Chinese man before her, she dropped a curse in English and left. Old Qi couldn't understand a word, but judging from the way her face twisted, there certainly hadn't been any pretty ones.

Xiao Zhou asked the old man, "Why's this woman so upset with us?"

As a security guard used to people eye-rolling at him, old Captain Qi wasn't fazed by the bad attitude and smiled. "What do ya think? You would also panic if billions of yuan were leaving your hands soon."

Not long after the white woman left, the cameras outside of the museum caught a suspicious person outside. Since the architectural focus of the Crane Museum was unification with nature, old trees and greenery surrounded the main building. The organic shapes made installing cameras in every corner difficult, so the security team had raised a few large police dogs to patrol the area at night, which they called the "canine defense."

The sharp canines found this suspicious individual and rushed forward without hesitation. During the struggle, one could almost hear the cries and screams of the person through the surveillance camera.

Old Qi pulled out his walkie-talkie and ordered his men to stop the dogs before the suspected burglar got severely injured—even criminals still had rights. He then ordered for the individual to be brought over to him.

The security guards were surprised to find this suspicious person was Liu Mingfang. The knee of his pants had been ripped and a handkerchief drenched in blood covered the opening.

“I’ve been taking care of this dog. It normally wouldn’t bite people.” A security guard stepped up, attempting to remove the handkerchief to check the injury, only to be scolded by the young man. He backed off a few meters.

Liu Mingfang explained to Old Qi he was simply passing by, and a dog had randomly attacked him. He needed a place to sit down right now.

“Uh... I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Old Qi’s expression grew grave. “Besides, even if the dog’s been vaccinated, it’s still better to get that injury checked out at the hospital.” He insisted on having someone escort Liu Mingfang.

Liu Mingfang complained as he kept his hand on his leg. “I’ll leave in a bit. Also, your dog bit someone. Shouldn’t you be responsible and at least pour a glass of water for me? Are you all waiting for me to sue you or something?!”

This was definitely a threat.

Old Qi recognized CEO Liu from the auctioning company; he was the son of the municipal bureau’s vice chief. Knowing he couldn’t fight back, he let the young man rest up in the surveillance room. Security guards surrounded the place; no one worried an injured young man could possibly cause any problems.

The exhibit displays took all day to set up from morning until around 5 or 6 P.M. Security guards were on a shift schedule, but the pressure and stress never left their shoulders knowing the exhibit would open the next day. Old Qi was a reasonable boss and didn’t expect people to stare at the surveillance camera all twenty-four hours without rest. With over forty screens in the room, keeping track of everything at once was impossible, so security guards were allowed to arrange their own shifts and take breaks.

Inside the main office, Liu Mingfang leaned on the wooden chair with one hand still pressed on his injury as he let out sighs every once in a while. He refused to go to the hospital or leave the museum—no one knew what he was up to.

Old Qi shot a quick glance at him. *What painting of a goddess. This is more like some demon-revealing mirror. Look at all these crazy souls summoned in just one night.* Over a decade of experience as a security guard and his professional instincts told him this was bound to be a restless evening.

“Hey, bros, check this out, what are these white spots?” A security guard pointed at the West Hall. “Tonight’s sure a wild one, eh? First a blackout and now a ghost on camera!”

“It’s that woman who got her hands cut off, right? That’s damn scary!” Another guard leaned in to take a peek and joined in the yelling.

“It might not be a ghost. Maybe the camera’s just acting up.”

“This is a brand-new HD infrared camera we just installed. Check out this white shadow—doesn’t it look kind of like a person’s hand?!”

The storm rumbled outside of the surveillance room. The suspicious white lights on the screen shone and moved strangely in different directions, like a horrifying hand without bones ready to reach out of the screen and choke someone.

This atmosphere sent chills down everyone's spines; the team whispered in fear.

Liu Mingfang couldn't stand the chitchatting and leaned forward to glimpse the white object. "This is just a large piece of dust. Infrared rays increase the temperature around itself and burn the dust around it, so they float and create these weird white spots."

Just as cats and mice don't get along, Liu Mingfang scoffed at the uneducated security guards, while the guards found the man too pretentious. The security guard who first pointed out the white dot rolled his eyes. "I sure hope a pretty girl ghost wouldn't mind stripping and exposing her chest—at least that would serve as some eye candy."

With this comment, the eerie atmosphere from earlier eased. The security guards began talking about more vulgar things. Liu Mingfang couldn't stand these inappropriate discussions and finally stood up to leave.

"Are you finally done resting, CEO Liu?" a guard asked him.

"I need to use the restroom first." Liu Mingfang limped out of the surveillance room with his injured leg.

"Xiao Zhou, help Mr. Liu and escort him to the restroom!" Old Qi called out with half a heart to keep an eye on Liu Mingfang. Even if the young man was injured, they could not simply let a stranger wander in the museum by himself.

Almost as soon as Liu Mingfang left for the restroom, Li Guochang arrived. It was an ironic coincidence that the two missed each other by a hair.

Li Guochang was fidgety and anxious like he had run all the way over. Before he could catch his breath, he grabbed Old Qi's arm. "Captain Qi, let me see the owner right now. It's urgent!"

Old Qi was also aware of Li Guochang's intention to cancel the exhibit. The million-yuan painting still belonged to the man. While donating it to the government was admirable, no one could object if the man changed his mind.

"I haven't seen him the whole day. I'm not sure if Mr. Zhang is even here." Zhang Wenli practically lived in the museum, which Old Qi knew as a veteran security guard.

"He is! He's here!" As Li Guochang reddened in panic, the wrinkles on his face flattened out. "I must see your owner immediately."

"All right, I'll have someone escort you."

“No need. It’s fine...” Li Guochang refused and rushed out at an impressive speed for his old age, almost like some fateful force had possessed him.

The rain continued to pour; the wind still blew restlessly. The typhoon roared across the sky, ready to uproot the old trees from earth. Old Qi looked at the clock on the wall. It was already 11 P.M., and he was getting tired, yet he forced himself to remain focused and awake, keeping his eyes on the screens. He watched Li Guochang’s every move. Strangely, Li Guochang didn’t head to Zhang Wenli’s office in the museum and instead rushed toward the East Hall.

He stopped in the wax figure area and mumbled something like he was speaking to someone—no; he was speaking to the void.

No one was in that area. What was he doing there? Did he plan to meet up with Liu Mingfang? But there was no sign of him either.

Old Qi tried to contact Xiao Zhou with his walkie-talkie but didn’t receive a response.

A sense of foreboding consumed Old Qi. He hoped for the uneventful arrival of the light of day, yet as soon as the thought crossed his mind, all of the lights inside the museum once again shut off. A few screens turned pitch-black. The Crane Museum had gone through another blackout. One blackout during a violent storm wasn’t surprising, but twice in a row?

“Shit! Fellas, we’re going in!” Old Qi took his security guards at full speed to the wax figure area. Less than five minutes later, batons and flashlights in hand, they arrived.

Li Guochang was on the ground, eyes bulging and mouth wide open like he had suffered a shocking and painful death.

“Quick, lock all exits in the museum!” The power hadn’t returned; the culprit was likely still inside the museum. Old Qi called out to his security guards and directed his team to lock up the doors as he swiftly picked up his phone to call the police. “Hello? Captain Tao—”

Before he could finish, a shadow struck him from within the darkness. Old Qi was focused on the phone call and hadn’t paid notice to his surroundings. He didn’t realize someone was standing
behind him, and so he took a heavy blow to the head, which knocked him out instantly.

The Girl Without a Pearl Earring

The night before the exhibit's opening, Li Guochang passed away and the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* disappeared.

The highly anticipated Impressions of China exhibit couldn't be held, but its position in the headlines remained. The whole world's eyes turned to the Crane Museum to ask two important questions: Who stole the painting? And who had killed the man?

Hanhai City Municipal Bureau's homicide and violent crime unit Captain Tao Longyue stood before a blackboard inside a meeting room. He held a marker in hand and drew on the board, explaining the case to his teammates in the room.

"The night of the murder, the Crane Museum went into a blackout. However, the surveillance cameras ran on a different power source. From the footage of the West Hall, we saw three men with covered faces dressed in security uniforms break open the glass of the display case of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*. They took the painting along with three other artifacts inside the museum. They quickly got into an SUV directly outside that had a censored license plate number. Security guards An Zhouang, Li Dahai, and Chen Xinzhong never returned to their post after the incident. Their physical features also match the three men caught stealing the painting in the camera, so this was a planned burglary.

"Thanks to the forensic team's efforts, we now have a full autopsy report of the victim, Li Guochang. The earlobes and cadaver tissues on the corpse turned a deep cherry pink, and a needle hole was found on the right side of the corpse's waist. The skin tissue around it was damaged with a three-by-three-centimeter, round subcutaneous hemorrhage around the needle hole. We've found cyanide in the fluids; it must have only taken about two minutes for the man to die, which matches symptoms of death from cyanide poisoning. From these points, we can determine that this was murder by cyanide injection."

Ding Li raised a hand. "So is it possible Li Guochang's murderer is among the three missing security guards?"

Tao Longyue answered gravely, "That is a possibility. Regardless of whether it's the burglar or the murder culprit, they must know the security protocols of the museum very well from the cameras' dead spots to the shifts of the security guards. We can't rule out the possibility a team of people split

up the work. They may have killed the man first and then stolen the painting."

Xiao Liang chimed in, "At 8 P.M. during the night of the murder and the time of the first blackout, Captain Tao and I personally checked the wax figure hall where the murder occurred. We confirmed no one hiding in the area, and even up until the second blackout, the camera never caught anyone besides Li Guochang. It's very possible the culprit was someone inside the museum at that time."

"But..." Ding Li twirled the pen in her hand, then jotted some notes. She still had her suspicions. "It takes about ten minutes to walk between the West and East Halls, and the locked display case of *The Ode to the Goddess Luo* was broken. The three security guards had no reason to kill Li Guochang and steal his keys if they were just going to break the lock anyway, right?"

The first blackout lasted five minutes; by the second, Old Qi was prepared and arrived at the scene of the crime much sooner. Xiao Liang's point infuriated Tao Longyue. The man had thoroughly checked the wax figure hall after the first blackout; how could someone from outside possibly sneak into the museum and leave without a trace in under five minutes during the second one?

Tao Longyue continued to mark on the blackboard. "Li Guochang returned this time to donate the painting, but during the few days before his murder, he kept bouncing between donating and not donating. This abnormal behavior might be a point of interest for us to investigate."

Another team member said, "We've already gotten a witness account from his wife, Evelyn, and checked Li Guochang's call history. He did receive a call from a newly activated number the day before his murder. Could it have been the culprit trying to lure him into the museum on the night of the murder?"

"Good thinking." Tao Longyue nodded. "It's been less than two weeks since Li Guochang returned. This mysterious phone number was also newly registered within the last two days. It's likely the culprit only started planning the murder after Li Guochang came back while the victim still had an extremely limited social network in China. Start by investigating people around him; focus on Zhang Wenli, Evelyn, Qin Ke, and Liu Mingfang."

Xiao Liang said, "We've already tracked down Li Guochang's whereabouts the day of the murder. He first had a fight with his wife in the hotel, and a housekeeper witnessed the whole ordeal. After the man left his room in anger, he went to Qin Ke's room on a different floor and asked the young man to go outside with him. From Qin Ke's account, he said he wasn't feeling too well and didn't follow Li Guochang; the surveillance from the hotel also showed Li Guochang left by himself. Around 7 P.M., Qin Ke couldn't stand the pain and left the hotel to go to the hospital. By the time Li Guochang was murdered, he was still getting his IV done. There were a lot of people in the hospital though,

so we can't prove if he ducked out and then back in. As for Evelyn, she rushed to the Crane Museum that day to pick another fight, but was later shooed away by security. Again, nobody can prove she didn't sneak back into the museum after; neither have a sufficient alibi. Both Evelyn and Qin Ke have their own motives: Evelyn wanted to sell the painting, but her husband wanted to donate it. All of their conflicts had been centered around this topic. In addition, Li Guochang was quite old and relied very heavily on Qin Ke for everything. I'm sure there must be some pent-up frustration and misunderstanding over the years."

"So..." Tao Longyue wrote down another name on the board. "What about Liu Mingfang?"

"Captain Tao..." Xiao Liang reminded him, "Liu Mingfang is... Chief Liu's..."

"I don't care who he is. As long as he's a suspect, we will investigate him like one!" Captain Tao didn't back down even in the face of his superiors. "Liu Mingfang has a clear motive. If Li Guochang dies, the painting's ownership will transfer to Evelyn, which is exactly what the man wants. His company is in a pinch right now, and if we follow the standard of a 25 percent commission fee from auctions, he could earn at least one billion yuan."

Xiao Liang nodded. "As for the owner of the museum, Zhang Wenli, he wasn't in the museum during the night of the murder according to the security guards on duty. Is it possible he was hiding where the guards couldn't see?"

"But the surveillance showed he never left his office on the top floor of the East Hall. Five minutes of blackout is not enough time for him to go all the way to the West Hall to commit the crime." The board was already filled with writing and diagrams. In addition to a chart of the relationship between the suspects and victims, there was also a map. Tao Longyue stared at the board, puzzled. "The key point is how the culprit managed to commit the murder; how did they kill a person and then run away during the brief blackout?"

"If only Big Bro Xie was here. He's super good at these 'impossible' murder cases." Even though she had only ever seen Xie Lanshan solve the Cong family case, Ding Li admired the senior cop from the bottom of her heart. She smiled brightly. "Sometimes I feel like a murderer actually lives in his brain."

Completely consumed by the case, Captain Tao only noticed Xie Lanshan's seat was empty after it was pointed out.

"Where's Xie Lanshan?" Tao Longyue was virtually breathing fire through his nostrils seeing that the man still hadn't returned after the storm. "He's not back yet?"

"He did return. He asked about the case and then... left again." Ding Li lowered her head to text Xie Lanshan, noticing that the captain was ready to

kill a man: *Hey, big bro, Cap'n is ready to murder someone. When are you coming back?*

—Ready to solve the case with your new in-law, with him right now.

After sending this one-line message to Ding Li on WeChat, Xie Lanshan placed his phone back into his pocket and looked up at Shen Liufei.

After the storm, the world had been newly washed. The sky was azure, the ground clear; all the noise and stains in the loud city were cleansed, as if it had been given a new life.

Shen Liufei took Xie Lanshan to a small antique street market where each booth was messily stacked with countless unique artifacts. Two famous antique markets existed in Hanhai City: the one on the east side was called Yunhe Antiques City; the west one was called Mingren Street Market. Even someone like Xie Lanshan had heard the names of these places on the news, yet he couldn't fathom why Shen Liufei would take him here.

Shen Liufei noticed his concern. "This place is filled with all sorts of people and merchandise; at least nine out of ten items for sale here are fake. The one-in-ten real deals come from either grave robbing or museums and private collections."

Shen Liufei turned his head; Xie Lanshan followed his gaze, noticing a colorful little head. A familiar girl's face appeared in sight—Tang Xiaomo.

She also had a booth here selling famous paintings and calligraphy. Perhaps what she had said that day at the bureau wasn't entirely a lie.

There was an old Chinese saying: "The clear sky can only be seen after dispersing the mist and clouds." Knowing he was brought to find some leads, Xie Lanshan laughed. "As usual, I'd like to hear your valuable opinion on the case, Mr. Shen."

"I don't have any, only some experience I can use to make a judgment." Shen Liufei's words were as courteous and sophisticated as usual, yet his voice always carried a hint of arrogance and a merciless undertone. Maybe this sharp and cold demeanor was why Tao Longyue still didn't feel comfortable around this new colleague. "The three burglars took three other antiques from the museum on top of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*."

"Right." Xie Lanshan nodded. "And?"

"The three items are valuable, but they're not unique. On the right of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* was Zhao Mengfu's calligraphy inspired by the same painting, *Ode to the Goddess*. This particular calligraphical piece was easily worth more than the total amount of the three artifacts the burglars took. The alarm went off immediately after the power came back. If their goal was to take the juiciest fruit, why would they waste effort picking seeds off the ground? And even if they decided to take some, why didn't they choose better

ones?"

Xie Lanshan understood the logic and nodded. "These thieves are clearly new to the trade and may not even know the true worth of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*. They were likely paid to steal the painting, and the other three artifacts they took for themselves. They will be desperate to get those off their hands and sell them to the black market. Then they would find ways to escape to another country and completely disappear from the eyes of the authorities, living a luxurious life with all the money they made from selling stolen antiques."

Shen Liufei agreed, "The murderer is careful and very skilled at hiding themselves. They must be connected to the two blackouts, which shows they are a highly intelligent criminal. In contrast, the people who stole the painting were amateurs who left too many holes—not to mention they have a bad eye for art. I lean more toward the idea the burglar and murderers are two different parties, but we may be able to solve the case if we can find the painting."

Xie Lanshan lifted his lips slightly; he had the same idea. "I think we're both clear now: the suspect pool is extremely small. I'm sure we aren't too far from solving the case."

"As for the murderer, have you considered why they would make so much effort to commit the crime inside the museum? Especially inside a place scheduled to open a national exhibit the next day, right under all that heavy security?"

"Could be a poor soul who wants attention?" Xie Lanshan pressed his lips together. "So uncreative."

"It certainly isn't creative, but it was effective." Shen Liufei suddenly reached around Xie Lanshan's waist and pulled the man toward him. The artist gestured like he was holding a syringe and poked the right side of Xie Lanshan's waist. Caught in Shen Liufei's embrace, Xie Lanshan instinctively struggled but couldn't move.

He quickly gave up and allowed the man to hold him. The two faced each other, noses almost touching as they breathed the same air.

"Even if Li Guochang is old, he is still an adult. There were no signs of a fight at the scene of the crime, so I'm going to suspect this culprit is also an adult man—of course, this could include women with a similar physique. The culprit's age is between twenty-five to thirty-five; he must be well educated and well-mannered but has an inferiority complex and is a control freak." Shen Liufei recited a poem to reiterate his point. "Evil is unspectacular and always human, and shares our bed and eats at our own table—W. H. Auden."

Maintaining the close distance and contact, Xie Lanshan narrowed his eyes. "The syringe used to inject the cyanide wasn't found at the scene of the murder, and I believe that a culprit as careful as this person must have worn

gloves while committing the crime, but he voluntarily took this dangerous item with him under time constraints after the murder and escape. This feels like an act of self-preservation that may have something to do with his job. This person may be someone detail-oriented who maintains a butler-like position at his work."

Mimicking Shen Liufei's speech pattern earlier, he followed up with another famous saying, "Biological organisms have one important shared characteristic: in order to protect themselves, they must minimize the energy used to survive—Avenarius's economic way of thinking."

The two men, both well-read, engaged in the conversation like young adults arm wrestling one another, showing off their skills.

Even Shen Liufei felt he was being childish now, but he couldn't help being led on by this man in front of him. He responded half-heartedly and didn't bother engaging in more pointless conversation after. "People often don't recognize the difference between a criminal before and after they commit a crime, but this contrast is jarring. People would instinctively consider the culprit as two different people before and after the crime."

The line referred to Li Guochang's murderer but somehow ended up hitting Xie Lanshan's weak spot. The man's mind went blank for a moment, and he couldn't find another smart line.

Finally, an epiphany came.

"Hanhai City Bureau Officer Xie Lanshan reports—I love you."

It was Shen Liufei's turn to be taken aback; his eyes widened slightly and he was speechless.

Xie Lanshan raised an eyebrow, leaning slightly to stare Shen Liufei in the eye, all while carrying a hint of a smile.

These words could make a young woman swoon. They were certainly effective even with men, but Shen Liufei was unamused. After a moment of shock, his cold face displayed clear rejection; the artist pushed the man off and walked away.

Quite displeased, Xie Lanshan called out to Shen Liufei from behind, "You weren't like this last night in bed!"

At this time, two young women happened to pass by and were completely awed. Their hearts jumped and grew excited. As veteran BL fans, they'd found a real gay couple on the streets for the first time! *Squish*—their two ice cream cones dropped to the ground.

"Hey, I'm just joking with ya—why are you so upset?" The artist turned without hesitation as Xie Lanshan jogged up to Shen Liufei. "I've already taken you to see your future mother-in-law, so it's your turn now; when will you take me to see your mom?"

Xie Lanshan was only joking, but Shen Liufei suddenly stopped. “She’s not around anymore.”

“Sorry...” Xie Lanshan didn’t mean to rub salt on old wounds and lowered his voice. “How... did she pass?”

Shen Liufei calmly looked into Xie Lanshan’s eyes. “She was murdered.”

(ii)

The antique market was a street full of vendors. From the outside, it looked like an unspectacular narrow alleyway until one stepped in to discover a whole new world behind the small entrance. From street vendors to permanent stores, jadeware to stoneware, old copper coins to ancient books, one could find anything. The families running the stores were often poor, but their poverty didn’t seem to bother them. They were at peace sitting at their storefronts waiting for customers to drop by.

Tang Xiaomo was selling merchandise as well. She stood before an old Chinese-style storefront; rosewood frames surrounded the antique shop and a black placard hung above the main entrance. Behind her was the center wall inside a store displaying colorful Minguo era glass art that matched her vibrant hair color.

A customer stood before the square reception desk in front of the shop. He was a middle-aged man donning a suit a little too tight for his beer belly. The wig on his head seemed to be an attempt to hide his balding hair. Tang Xiaomo slowly unrolled a piece of artwork for the customer, whose eyes widened visibly.

The two men stood beneath the shadows of an old tree a suitable distance away, which allowed them to watch without disturbing the young girl. Xie Lanshan narrowed his eyes and leaned toward Shen Liufei, realizing he didn’t recognize the painting. “Who’s that by?”

Shen Liufei shot a glance at the painting. “Wu Changshuo’s red plum painting. Too bad it’s fake, and very obviously so.”

“How so?”

“The plum flowers can almost be easily mistaken as Wu Changshuo’s actual drawing. It’s crisp and smoothly drawn with one stroke. But look at the branches at the bottom right corner of the painting—there’s a clear trace of adjustment.”

Xie Lanshan didn’t hide his ignorance in this field and only noticed the difference when Shen Liufei pointed it out. There certainly was an extra-thin stroke at the corner. The customer clearly couldn’t tell and pulled out a fat black wallet. He didn’t pay with card, instead opting to hand five full stacks of RMB to Tang Xiaomo, then asked, “This painting is a gift. They won’t be able

to tell it's a fake, right?"

Tang Xiaomo began to count the money on hand.

"Isn't that a bit too much money for a fake?" Xie Lanshan frowned slightly. "Are you not going to stop them?"

"They're both willing participants. The seller's a con artist, and the buyer's likely an official trying to buy favors at his work; what's wrong with letting the two of them learn a little lesson?" Shen Liufei glanced over at Xie Lanshan. "Besides, I'm an artist, not a cop. I'm not obligated to mingle in shady business."

He wasn't entirely wrong. Following Shen Liufei, Xie Lanshan strolled past a few shops and vendors around the area to obtain some intel from locals. A shop owner selling similar fake paintings seemed to be acquainted with Shen Liufei; he greeted the two men fondly and answered all their questions.

As if he had discovered some rare treasure, the man from Tang Xiaomo's shop took the plum painting and proudly walked off. The shop owner, watching from afar, shrugged. "A real Wu Changshuo painting is worth at least up in the seven digits; this person must want to kiss ass but isn't willing to spend that much."

Xie Lanshan asked curiously, "Is it hard to tell an original from a fake?"

"A well-replicated fake could be mistaken as an original, but not the one he's holding. At most, it's worth about seven to eight hundred." The owner, also an expert in the field, turned to Shen Liufei. "Mr. Shen here is a well-known artist experienced in calligraphy. He should know."

Shen Liufei answered Xie Lanshan's question, "There are two different methods of replicating art nowadays. One is manually through the hands of a skilled artist by tracing or direct copying, and the other is to print out a copy using high-tech printers. The former cannot be easily learned, but the artist can rely on their creative skills and copy the same style in a completely original painting. Without an original to compare it to, it's very difficult to tell whether these artworks are drawn by a copier or the original artist."

The shop owner nodded. "Yes, indeed. For example, if you were to copy Qi Baishi or Wu Changshuo's art style, it wouldn't be too hard due to the sheer number of paintings they created. Many of them were recorded in books but have been lost over time, so as long as we have a skilled artist with xuan paper left from the late Qing dynasty, they could easily draw something out before your eyes. If you were to take them to an auction upon completion, I doubt anyone could tell."

Shen Liufei continued, "The latter method creates a copy with higher accuracy. One simply cannot tell unless they put it under a microscope. However, this requires you to obtain the original work."

The shop owner nodded. Shen Liufei nudged curiously at Xie Lanshan. The man's gesture meant he had ways to sell these paintings regardless of whether they were stolen or fake; he could even send them out to auctions overseas if needed. Xie Lanshan understood this place handled everything from replicating fake paintings to selling them. No wonder Shen Liufei decided to take him here—they had come at the right time.

Xie Lanshan still had another question for the shop owner, but Tang Xiaomo walked out of her shop. Perhaps she was only watching for someone else and planned on leaving before business hours ended. Tang Xiaomo also noticed Xie Lanshan; her eyes widened, and her mouth opened dramatically before she ran away.

Xie Lanshan grabbed a handful of candy from the old shop owner's reception desk and chased after the girl. Without a word, Shen Liufei followed behind. He hopped onto his bike, quickly rounding to the other end of the market entrance.

Tang Xiaomo ran like a desperate wild rabbit, but before the exit, Shen Liufei and his bike blocked her path. Meanwhile, Xie Lanshan caught up to her from behind. He pulled on Tang Xiaomo nonchalantly, without much force, then noticed the young girl was ready to tug her shirt off once she struggled her way out of his grip.

Feeling a hunch she was going to pull the same act, Xie Lanshan flashed his police badge at the curious crowd. "Police investigating illegal activities. Back away."

The curious pedestrians eyed Tang Xiaomo's dyed hair and half-pulled shirt; stereotyping got the best of them, and they turned their heads with a scoff and walked away.

Tang Xiaomo was mad. "Are you calling me a prostitute?!"

Xie Lanshan's expression remained stern. "I'm simply asking for you to come with us to assist in our investigation. I'm sure you've seen the news already—the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* has been stolen, and the old man that brought it back was also murdered."

"If you got evidence I was stealing things, then go ahead and take me, but nobody's stupid enough to bring loads of cash with them on hand right now, so you ain't gonna find anything. Without hard evidence, you can only keep me in the bureau for fifteen days at most." Tang Xiaomo knew her rights; she clearly didn't intend to assist in the investigation. "I'll be gone within fifteen days anyway."

"Yeah." Xie Lanshan nodded. "Robbery won't get you a significant amount of jail time, but hiding an illegal substance is a different story."

Tang Xiaomo was puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Xie Lanshan eyed the pocket of her shirt and smiled. "Check there."

Tang Xiaomo pulled out a bag of small but colorful pills and froze. When he grabbed her earlier, Xie Lanshan had snuck it into her pocket.

"Looks like about seven years' worth of jail time right there." Shaking his head, Xie Lanshan pulled out handcuffs from his pocket and waved them before her. "You better come with me or I'll have to handcuff you."

"No cop's as sly as you." Tang Xiaomo had no choice but to do as she was told. She had robbed many a pocket at nightclubs and bars; she knew she couldn't say she'd never snatched a bag of drugs before.

"You have to be slier than the fox to catch it." Xie Lanshan waved the handcuffs again. "Now, I'm going to ask you a few questions, and you better answer. When you came in last time to report a crime, why did you say the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* painting was drawn by your friend? It hadn't been on display in China yet."

"I saw some photos of it from the internet. There's a special marking on the painting that I made."

Shen Liufei got off his bike and walked over. A hint of surprise surfaced on his face. "What's the name of your friend?"

"You won't believe me even if I said it. Your Captain Tao scolded me for reporting a fake crime last time and threatened to keep me in custody if I go in again."

"Don't worry about that dimwit. I'm easier to talk to; you can try explaining to me." Xie Lanshan encouraged her to speak up.

After hesitating, Tang Xiaomo finally spilled the words stuck in her throat. "That *Ode to the Goddess Luo* painting was drawn by my grandpa. He used to work as a museum supervisor under Zhang Wenli but went missing six years ago after falling off a mountain."

Xie Lanshan and Shen Liufei exchanged a glance of surprise and awe. If what Tang Xiaomo said was true, there was more to the story waiting behind this case; it was not as simple as they thought.

"I've told you what I could." Tang Xiaomo handed the bag of pills to Xie Lanshan. "Here, take your ecstasy."

Xie Lanshan stared at her innocently as if he couldn't understand. After about ten minutes of acting, he smiled, took out two pills, and tossed them up in the air, swiftly catching both in his mouth, then the cop turned to a completely shocked Tang Xiaomo with a wide smile. "This is fruit candy."

"You... how could you?!" Completely baffled, Tang Xiaomo turned to Shen Liufei. "How, he... how could he do that?!"

Shen Liufei also hadn't expected something so audacious, but after a moment of surprise, the corner of his lips lifted subconsciously. The man's pockets were filled with dirt—he was smoother than an eel in freshwater and slier than a fox.

“How could I what? Did I say something?” Xie Lanshan showed no shame. “We public security have discipline and our pride—how could we possibly engage in lies and corruption considering our positions?”

Tang Xiaomo followed Xie Lanshan back to the Hanhai City Municipal Bureau and explained everything she knew. Her grandfather’s name was Tang Zhaozhong; he was also an artist. However, he never had a successful breakthrough and often received harsh criticism from so-called appraisers of art. The critiques affected him; he couldn’t even sell a single piece of his work. According to Grandpa Tang himself, worth was not measured by the value and time behind a product. When it came to the arts and entertainment, only those who knew how to serve fast food and hop on trends could make a living while the truly skilled artisans could not afford their next meal.

Later, to survive, Tang Zhaozhong was forced to give up his art and applied to be a museum supervisor, where he first met Zhang Wenli. At the time, Zhang Wenli was not the Crane Museum’s director but rather the vice director of the city’s public museum. According to Tang Xiaomo, Zhang Wenli, a friendly and easygoing man, had a good relationship with her grandfather. She would always see them chatting after school when she was little, but she couldn’t recall the details because of her young age.

After becoming the supervisor of the city’s public art museum, Tang Zhaozhong spent his days studying famous paintings of the past. He later switched from drawing original paintings to replicating ancient works; his skills were honed through practice, and he drew everything from flowers to birds to nature. Finally, he could mimic original artworks by hand at an astonishing accuracy, fooling even a seasoned collector’s eyes.

Tang Xiaomo said, “That Wu Changshuo plum painting you saw was drawn by my grandpa.”

Shen Liufei spoke courteously but bluntly, “Excuse me for being straightforward, but that plum art your grandfather drew looks almost nothing like the original.”

Tang Xiaomo panicked. “He did it on purpose! He was afraid someone would take his replicas and mess with the market, so he would purposely make a few bad strokes to show it was a fake.”

Shen Liufei lifted his head slightly. “No wonder.” No wonder why the plum flowers looked as though they were drawn by the hands of a skilled and bold artist but the branches seemed to be drawn by someone else. He then frowned and said, “I think I’ve heard your grandfather’s name before.”

Tang Xiaomo nodded, feigning expertise knowing that the artist lived in the States. “Do you have any foreign friends who bought my grandpa’s paintings? He would sometimes try and replicate Western oil paintings too. He once

copied *Girl with a Pearl Earring* but changed the face to me and removed the pearl. Either way, I know that these clear mistakes were drawn on purpose."

Shen Liufei agreed. "The art of replica production can be split into four main methods: tracing, copying, imitating, and creating. Tracing is the dictionary definition. You simply trace over the original by placing a thin piece of paper on top. To copy, you place the original in front of you and recreate it exactly on your own canvas. Imitating merely means mimicking the brush strokes and style of the original work without any blueprint. Creating requires making a completely original but fake artwork out of the blue in the name of an artist or by producing a digital copy. You said your grandfather copied famous painters after getting a job at the city's public museum. Which method did he work with?"

Xie Lanshan wasn't well versed in this field. "I don't think Old Man Tang would do the last one, but does it matter which method it was?"

Shen Liufei answered confidently, "Yes, they're different. I'm asking if your grandfather had the original painting with him when he replicated those famous artworks."

It had happened over ten years ago. Tang Xiaomo made her best attempt to recall it. "I think he did have the original! One time, I was playing in Grandpa's room and saw a painting on his table. I don't know if he traced or copied or had his own method of replicating it, but he got really mad when he saw me run in and pushed me out, then locked the door."

Shen Liufei commented, "Zhang Wenli must have used his position as vice director and allowed your grandfather to take home an original painting to replicate. You can continue."

Tang Xiaomo said, "My grandpa was very happy during that time, and he was smiling every day. He's obsessed with art and was always painting with his whole heart, so to paint and have other people acknowledge his work was more important to him than making money. But the good days didn't last; the museum caught on fire and killed two people inside."

Tao Longyue interrupted her, "I remember that news story. I think it was about seven or eight years ago; they said the old electronics in the museum short-circuited. The museum was mostly filled with flammable artifacts like calligraphy, so it spread throughout the building very quickly. Tons of famous paintings were burned to ashes overnight—it really was a shame."

Tang Xiaomo nodded. "Zhang Wenli resigned from his position due to this incident, and my grandpa was also very upset. He locked himself inside his room for a really long time after. I overheard them arguing one day; my grandpa was furious and said something like, 'Two people have died already, I can't do this anymore!' Then he went out on a trip to get a change of scenery but never returned. The local authorities told me that he fell off the mountain,

and even though they couldn't find his body, it's very likely he didn't survive..."

Xie Lanshan pondered. "Vice Director Zhang Wenli who resigned transformed himself into a respectable individual in his industry within a few years—certainly a character."

Shen Liufei looked at Tang Xiaomo. "Are you sure the photos of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* you saw online was the one drawn by your grandfather?"

Tang Xiaomo nodded firmly. "Yes. I stained it when I was a kid. I was playing around and spilled some ink, leaving some fingerprints behind. Also, I remember very clearly—two days before my grandpa fell off the mountain, the painting wasn't even halfway done. After he fell, the painting also disappeared with him."

Xie Lanshan's sharp mind caught on. "So are you saying Old Man Tang didn't die and was instead kidnapped to a secret hideout, then forced to finish this *Ode to the Goddess Luo* painting?"

Shen Liufei said, "If what Miss Tang says is true, that is likely the case. Yet we have no proof aside from oral accounts, so the most important task is to retrieve the stolen painting."

Tang Xiaomo fully admitted she spent her time hanging out in markets and places where grave robbers and antique sellers gathered to investigate her grandfather's disappearance. She was also aware someone within the community planned to smuggle antiques overseas. From what she gathered, the artifacts were stolen from the Crane Museum.

Tao Longyue quickly asked, "Where does that seller live? They can't possibly refuse to cooperate with public security if we pay them a visit for this case, right?"

"Are you stupid?" Tang Xiaomo still harbored some antagonism toward Captain Tao and instinctively argued back whenever he spoke up, "Ya think anyone would admit they're a grave robber to a bunch of cops showing up at their door unprompted?"

Tao Longyue followed up rather quickly, "Then we'll disguise ourselves and go undercover to collect intel."

"Now we're talking!" Tang Xiaomo's eyes glistened; her colorful pigtails shook at the turn of her head. "I know where that person usually goes—it's a very well-hidden club in the city."

"Now that makes it easy! We'll disguise ourselves as clients and go into the club to talk with the person, then collect intel." Tao Longyue slapped his hand excitedly against his leg and turned to Tang Xiaomo with a glowing eye. "Hey, kid, what's the address of the club?"

"I'm not telling you." Tang Xiaomo eyed Tao Longyue, then shifted her gaze to Xie Lanshan and Shen Liufei. "It's not like you guys can make it in

even if I did."

Xie Lanshan asked, "Why not?"

"It's not that I'm not cooperating. The club's women-only. You men with your ding-dongs aren't welcome."

It took a while for Tao Longyue to realize what she meant. "Wait, so that antique seller you mentioned earlier is a woman?!"

Tang Xiaomo nodded. "Yeah, but that's not all—she's one big hottie too."

Ding Li, listening quietly on the side, couldn't withhold her excitement. This was a rare chance for her to show off. She hadn't become a cop to be stuck inside an office writing reports all day—she might as well get a normal office job if she wanted that. She raised her hand high. "I'm a girl. I could go in!"

Eying Ding Li briefly, Tao Longyue shook his head. "No way. You're still an internal staff member and not even a proper investigator yet. Having you deal with these black-market sellers by yourself is too risky." He regretted his words almost immediately; Ding Li was the only female officer in the entire violent crime unit.

"Well, it's not like the club has an actual sign saying, 'No men or dogs allowed inside,' so there are still ways to sneak in if y'all want." Tang Xiaomo glanced past Tao Longyue to Xie Lanshan. "But don't even think about going in as a cop. Your only choice is to disguise yourself as a host."

Offended on behalf of all his male colleagues, Captain Tao jumped up to howl, "No way!"

Until she heard this line, Ding Li was ready to fight for her rare opportunity to go undercover. She shifted gears. "Why not? This is the twenty-first century. It's called gender equality, you know? If men can spend time hanging out at nightclubs and bars, of course women who have money and time deserve to treat themselves to some entertainment too. It's not like we're asking you to do anything out of line. You just need to drink with the girls and maybe dance."

Tang Xiaomo certainly had a knack for persuasion. "Look at those cop shows and movies; every time a man has to go undercover, they're always given powerful roles like drug trafficker or a thief. Even the most insignificant are usually gangsters on the streets. But female officers who go undercover are always shoehorned in as mistresses or hostesses. Who makes these shitty rules? If we're all working together for the same goal, who gave men the right to have 'better' roles?"

Xie Lanshan nodded and smiled in agreement. "This is certainly true."

Unexpectedly, Tang Xiaomo pinched Tao Longyue's waist, seeming disappointed. "It's not like I'm asking you to go in anyway. Sure, you have muscles, but you're too thick and square, not pretty enough." As she stared at

Shen Liufei and Xie Lanshan, an epiphany bloomed inside her. “These two are much better options.”

Xie Lanshan laughed. To avoid being shoved into a job too hastily just because of his looks, he quickly added, “I have a suggestion. This isn’t to say women are inferior, but Ding Li really can’t act out the role of a powerful businesswoman with money to buy expensive antiques. That doesn’t mean we can’t borrow people from the forensic science division. Doctor Su would fit the role perfectly.”

(iii)

While they waited for Tang Xiaomo’s news, Xie Lanshan and Tao Longyue investigated the scene of the crime a second time. They searched carefully through the trees and bushes outside of the Crane Museum’s main gate under the blazing hot sun.

The flowers proudly bloomed, and the trees boastfully extended themselves; the vines and green leaves practically covered the walls of the building with life. Appreciating this scenery while indoors with air conditioning wasn’t a bad idea, but hunting for evidence outdoors was hellish.

After searching through the bushes for an hour, Tao Longyue finally stood and wiped some sweat off his face with his sleeves. “Hey, let’s take a quick break. This is harder than I thought.” He wasn’t complaining about the weather—it was simply too hot.

“Nothing in this world is that easy.” Xie Lanshan agreed it was quite warm and tied his hair up into a little ponytail, exposing a small segment of skin on his neck. “Be grateful we aren’t making you farm in this weather.”

“You said you were out with Shen Liufei these last two days to find evidence. What did you discover?”

“I found out he’s pretty hot.” Lifting his head, Xie Lanshan rubbed his chin. He studied Tao Longyue and smiled. “He’s practically a walking encyclopedia. But his attitude can be fickle, he’s either cold or friendly, quiet or wild—it’s virtually impossible to read him.”

“I’m asking what you found out about the case!” Tao Longyue was ready to roll his eyes; he couldn’t fathom this man talking like a young maiden in love.

“Oh.” Xie Lanshan pondered slightly. “He profiled the murderer. The culprit is most likely a man between the age of twenty-five to thirty-five, tall, well educated, and quite humble. Possibly works as a butler or secretary—somewhere in the service industry.” He paused. “Who does this sound like?”

“Liu Mingfang? He fits pretty much everything aside from one point; that piece of shit isn’t well-mannered or humble, and he’s technically an investment business owner so he doesn’t count.”

“Criminal profiling is only a theoretical method of investigation to help organize our thoughts. It’s normal when the initial profile doesn’t exactly match the true culprit.” Behind a small bush was a handkerchief stained in blood; he frowned. “Besides, his relationship with that Evelyn lady doesn’t seem to be simple, so he has more motives to commit the crime.”

Tao Longyue was shocked. “Not that simple? Like in what way?”

Xie Lanshan returned a question to him, “The gentleman and lady both consented. What do you think I’m referring to?”

Tao Longyue wasn’t convinced. “How did you know?”

“Heard it from Li Guochang’s secretary. He didn’t say it explicitly, but think about it—if you really want to auction artwork, Poly Group, Sotheby, Christie’s—plenty of big auctioning corporations out there work with Li Guochang regularly. Why did they have to choose a small unknown company like Liu Mingfang’s?”

Tao Longyue was aware the two men were at odds with each other over a hostility stemming from an ex-wife, so he swallowed his opinions and pondered upon this possibility for a while before nodding. He said in agreement, “It really is strange. According to Old Qi, the guy was bitten by a police dog taking a stroll outside the museum. That’s why he was brought inside the security office to rest up. Doesn’t it sound fishy? How could anyone ‘accidentally’ pass by a museum in the middle of the night?”

“Even more strangely, I ran into Liu Mingfang two days before the murder at Qilian’s clinic. I found something that fell out of his bag—a timed electronic relay switch.” Xie Lanshan put on vinyl gloves, picked up the bloody handkerchief, sniffed it, and realized it wasn’t actually blood.

“These switches that can be used to make wires short-circuit can be bought anywhere. It’s not enough to prove Liu Mingfang is the culprit. I know you hold some bias against him because of Qilian, but we can’t simply arrest him out of spite—”

Suddenly, Xie Lanshan handed the piece of cloth to Tao Longyue. “What about this?”

“This is...?” Upon closer inspection, he realized it wasn’t blood. He sniffed the piece of cloth. “Red ink with glue. Looks almost real.” His eyes widened. “Are you saying... Liu Mingfang never was bitten by any dogs and was only finding an excuse to sneak into the museum?!”

Standing, Xie Lanshan narrowed his eyes. “We can question him when we bring him in. Since security guard Xiao Zhou is one of the thieves, no one was actually watching Liu Mingfang when he went into the restroom.”

Tao Longyue’s voice lowered almost subconsciously, “We’ve actually sent in an official investigation questioning request to Liu Mingfang already, but he’s been dragging it out and hasn’t responded... He doesn’t live in his old

house anymore." The man was hesitant to pursue anything further in fear of upsetting Liu Mingfang's father—the vice chief of their municipal bureau, Liu Yanbo.

Xiao Liang took care of the evidence. Xie Lanshan took off his gloves. "Then send in an arrest warrant. Force him."

Xie Lanshan always acted on his words. After going through proper procedures in the bureau, he took Tao Longyue and paid a visit to Liu Yanbo's residence at the worst possible time. When the old auntie opened the door, the house was filled with people. In the center of the living room was a round table; the five members of the Liu family and high-ranking officials from the city and big corporations were seated at it. A large cake sat at the center of the table. Today was Liu Yanbo's wife Yang Lin's birthday.

Song Qilian was also among the guests. She only wanted to drop her son, Liu Chang, off to have dinner with his grandmother, but couldn't refuse the old woman's warm invitation.

Liu Mingfang sat beside his mother. Seeing Xie Lanshan and Tao Longyue by the door, he lowered his head in guilt. He knew the two cops were here for him.

Liu Yanbo was just past sixty, but as one of the former members of the Flaming Triangle, he didn't seem weak. Unlike Xie Jiaqing, who gave his life at a young age, or Tao Jun, who had allowed time to take a toll on him, the vice chief was still tall and strong. He spoke clearly and firmly to his juniors and subordinates during work.

"Hey, Young Xie and Little Tao, you two sure came to visit at a good time. Here, have a seat with us." Vice Chief Liu didn't seem to have caught on to the case; he courteously called the new guests over. The auntie brought two more chairs.

"No need." Xie Lanshan's gaze shifted toward Liu Mingfang, whose head was practically buried in his chest at this point. "We're here for an investigation."

Tao Longyue cleared his throat, reminding Xie Lanshan he was still facing a senior at work.

Liu Mingfang called out to Liu Yanbo in a meek voice, "Dad."

Liu Yanbo's expression grew sterner; his eyebrows pressed together. "Young Xie, I already know about that case you're referring to."

"Oh? That sure saves us some time," Xie Lanshan walked toward the living room. The auntie tried to stop him but slowly backed away with every step forward the man took.

His flirtatious eyes were now sharp, like a blade slicing through the air.

He looked down at Liu Mingfang from above, then said in a flat tone, “Our bureau is currently investigating case 2018-9-7, Mr. Li Guochang’s homicide. In order to investigate the truth behind this case, I am now requesting an official questioning of criminal suspect Liu Mingfang in accordance with Criminal Procedural Law Section 122 of the People’s Republic of China.”

Everyone inside the house was stunned, including Tao Longyue—he hadn’t expected Xie Lanshan to speak out so boldly at a time like this.

Liu Mingfang turned to his father in desperation, “Dad, I didn’t... I swear I didn’t...” He couldn’t even bring himself to say the word “murder” in front of all of his friends and family.

That usual confidence on Liu Yanbo’s face froze, melting into something darker and graver. His eyebrows pressed together even more, like the silence before a storm.

Noticing the change in atmosphere, Tao Longyue quickly jumped in to explain, “It’s impossible for someone to kill a man inside the museum and escape within five minutes of the blackout, so the culprit must have never left. Aside from the security guards on night duty during the time, Liu Mingfang is the only other person most likely to have come in contact with the victim. We’ve discovered a handkerchief left behind the bushes outside of the museum stained with fake blood; on it were fingerprints belonging to Liu Mingfang and a security guard who’d helped him up. Liu Mingfang lied about being bitten by a dog. His goal was to sneak into the museum—”

Liu Mingfang stuck his leg out from under the table and quickly rolled up his pants. “Look, I have a scar...”

“We can tell if it’s a new or old injury with a simple medical checkup.” Xie Lanshan looked at Liu Mingfang coldly. “I will advise you to think before you speak.”

Liu Mingfang didn’t open his mouth again.

After tracing out the full story, Liu Yanbo finally spoke up, “Young Xie, listen to your Uncle Liu here for a second.”

In his mind Xie Lanshan was laughing. Here the old man was Uncle Liu, but he certainly hadn’t shown any mercy when he insisted on removing Xie Lanshan from the violent crime unit.

“Mingfang’s mother has been sick for a long time; she is only feeling well enough now to come out. It happens to be her birthday today, so we want to have a nice family and friends’ dinner with everyone.” Liu Yanbo’s eyes met Xie Lanshan’s gaze—the pleading expression from a father appeared on his face. “I’ll personally take him over to the violent crime unit tomorrow morning for the questioning. Is that all right with you?”

Tao Longyue tugged on Xie Lanshan’s arm and whispered into the man’s ear. He wanted to tell him to give it a rest since their boss was practically

begging them.

Xie Lanshan turned to look at Yang Lin in the main seat. He already heard the old woman was fighting cancer. Old age and illness had clearly taken a toll on her body. Even heavy makeup couldn't hide her sickly color.

Xie Lanshan's heart softened; he turned away only to see a painting hanging on the wall—the same fake painting a merchant once purchased from the antique market. Wu Changshuo's red plum painting. He remembered that there was a misdrawn tree branch at the lower right corner.

Unpleasant memories surfaced, expanding like rapidly growing vines over his mind. Xie Lanshan pulled out his blue cigarette pack, placed one between his lips, and lit it subconsciously. Turning to Liu Yanbo, he spoke as a cloud of smoke billowed from his mouth, "That's a nice painting you got there, Chief Liu."

It certainly was a bold and disrespectful move, but Liu Yanbo didn't pick a fight in front of everyone and simply smiled. "It's thanks to Mingfang's kindness. He knows I like these things and asked a friend to bring one back for me."

"A respectful son is admirable, but not a reason to disregard proper procedure." Xie Lanshan grabbed the envelope from Tao Longyue and pulled out a paper. "I brought the arrest warrant with me today as well. Chief Liu, you can sign it for me right now."

"Xie Lanshan!" Tao Longyue growled. An arrest warrant required the signature and stamp of the direct supervisor of the bureau. Asking Liu Yanbo to sign for his own son was almost as insulting as a slap in the face in public. This was clearly a spiteful move driven by a personal grudge. "You're out of line!"

Liu Yanbo's expression was dark; he sat still while the rest of the guests held their breaths.

Liu Mingfang's mother stood up from her seat with a piece of cake in hand and walked anxiously toward Xie Lanshan.

"Oh, Little Xie, Qilian is here today too. You can sit beside her and have a piece with us." Her attitude was sincere; her eyes glistened from the tears welling in her eyes. "I don't know if I'll even make it to my next birthday, so can you please let Mingfang go to the bureau tomorrow? Please, give him some time to celebrate his mother's birthday..."

The woman was short, so Xie Lanshan had to look down. He kept his cigarette in his mouth; the corner of his lips pulled tightly into a thin line.

Then he shoved the cigarette into the piece of cake. "I'm taking him once this goes out. I'll give you five minutes."

The entire living room was dead silent. Tao Longyue and Song Qilian exchanged a glance; this Xie Lanshan before them wasn't merely just strange

but a complete stranger.

"Summoning homicide case suspect Liu Mingfang..." Xie Lanshan looked at his watch. "As of September 15th, 2018, the suspect must arrive at Hanhai Public Security Bureau by 21:00 for official questioning."

He turned and left.

Tao Longyue could tell something was off with Xie Lanshan and turned to Song Qilian, pleading for the therapist's help. "Go see if he's all right."

The two quickly rushed out the door.

A sharp pain struck Xie Lanshan like something was ripping through his skull. He quickly paced out of the Liu residence and pressed an arm against Tao Longyue's golden car, panting heavily with his head down. Cold sweat covered his forehead from the pain; the sweat rolled into his eyes, then down his tall nose onto the ground.

A woman approached him from behind.

Xie Lanshan lifted his head and saw the reflection of the figure in the car's window. That woman in white again.

Yes, the woman he thought would not appear again had shown up once more. She was young and beautiful but also like a snake swimming out from the depths of the darkest mire, ready to bite him when he least expected.

When the woman stood directly behind him, Xie Lanshan turned his head abruptly and grabbed her wrist. "That's enough! Stop bothering me!"

But before him was Song Qilian, her wrist twisted uncomfortably. She looked at him in horror.

"S-sorry..." Surprised at his own actions, Xie Lanshan let go of her. He pulled himself back together, returning to his usual amiable self. "Sorry... my head hurts..."

As soon as he finished, the world blacked out; he fell to the ground.

(iv)

Xie Lanshan dropped into a dream about his days in the Golden Triangle. The organization was a grandiose symbol of luxury but also a treacherous land of no laws.

Inside the wooden sauna, Mu Kun restlessly poured more water onto the stove as if he intended to punish himself. The steam continued to fill the air as the temperature rose rapidly.

What used to be a place of relaxation turned into purgatory. Aside from Xie Lanshan and Mu Kun, everyone else in the room complained; those who couldn't stand it stepped out. Within half an hour, even Gold Tooth gave in and ran out of the room, bidding Mu Kun goodbye.

Only two people were left inside the sauna. Mu Kun took a drag from the cigarette in his mouth, then handed it to Xie Lanshan.

Xie Lanshan lowered his head, bit onto the butt, and took a puff.

"Why did you choose this place?" Xie Lanshan's voice was hoarse from the heat; sweat covered his whole body.

"I don't get to see you like this normally, exposed and uncovered. Isn't it nice?" The two men only had a towel around their waists. Mu Kun's gaze pierced through the heavy vapors between them, studying Xie Lanshan's sweat-covered body. His skin was seemingly coated in a layer of clear oil and had turned red from the heat. His muscles tensed from the temperature, looking defined as the liquid rolling down his body made him exceptionally more attractive.

Xie Lanshan didn't respond. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, attempting to keep his mind cool.

"The last of the eight hells is the Avici. You become one with the blazing fire; your body burns into dust. You can't die, nor can you escape, which is why among all of the hells, the Avici is the most painful and horrific." It was too hot inside this room as well, as if they were serving a sentence inside a burning cage. Mu Kun turned to Xie Lanshan. "Has there been a time you felt like you were living in hell?"

Xie Lanshan opened his eyes; he only responded in his head.

Every day, every second.

Mu Kun made his way in front of Xie Lanshan and lifted the man's chin. "But if there's only the two of us in this hell, it may as well be heaven."

Xie Lanshan answered half-heartedly, "Maybe."

"Why don't you ever talk? It's almost like you can't." Losing interest, Mu Kun poured another ladle of water onto the hot stone. The liquid vaporized almost instantly and spread out into the air.

"I actually have something to tell you today," Mu Kun suddenly spoke up in a deathly tone. "I need you to start a fire and burn down the opium farm of those four old men."

Xie Lanshan normally wouldn't question a task Mu Kun assigned to him, but his gaze clearly asked for an explanation. The politics within the Golden Triangle had always been complicated. By the time Mu Kun took over the throne, the four big families following his father naturally had their eyes on him. Of course, the older generation prided themselves on their experience and skills, while he refused to let others control his actions.

"The drug market is rapidly changing nowadays. Heroin is already on the decline, but those four fossils refuse to listen and won't assist me in developing new substances. Don't you Chinese people have a saying that goes, 'break the broken cauldrons and sink the old ship'?" When he wasn't in

his right mind, Mu Kun had even thought about assassinating those four old men and using the family as his watchdogs.

Xie Lanshan pondered. “Among the families, Ge Gang is the most headstrong, and Ba Song values peace the most. You can’t talk to a brute with words, and you don’t need to convince a peacemaker; that makes two. Wu Suo and Wu Kanbu have almost never seen eye to eye with each other and even got into a conflict over business recently. Hence, it’s the perfect time to burn down one of their opium farms—add fuel onto the existing fire. By the time the two factions escalate into war and drain their own resources, you can step in to break up the fight and mediate, allocating compensation from the leftover opium. Or you can offer to develop new substances. Nobody would be willing to share their existing profits without good reason, so you know they’ll choose the latter. By the time those two get their taste of profit from the new substances, you’ll have two forces behind you to face the others. Three versus two. Clearly, the majority wins.”

“I knew I could trust my eyes.” Mu Kun laughed. “Do you know about red ice?”

Xie Lanshan nodded. “Pure meth extraction.”

Mu Kun blew out a cloud of smoke from his cigarette. “Heroin’s already popular enough to be in public school textbooks; most people are too scared to try it now, but red ice is different. It’s mysterious and veiled. From the outside, it looks like an amethyst. It’s extremely beautiful but also extremely addictive. One try triggers dependency. It also serves as an aphrodisiac, which can easily be used to lure in young women.”

Xie Lanshan looked at Mu Kun.

“I plan on giving the entire red ice market in China to you.” Mu Kun wrapped an arm around Xie Lanshan, skin rubbing against skin in the heat. “You can’t separate drugs from sex, like how money and women are naturally part of a man’s life. Your country still hasn’t shown red ice among the drugs they’ve tracked down, which means nobody has noticed this market potential yet. Think about it: there are over twenty million high school girls in China alone, like over twenty million treasures waiting to be discovered...”

Xie Lanshan clenched his fist silently.

“What are you thinking?” Mu Kun leaned in toward Xie Lanshan; his sharp eyes caught every fleeting and hidden emotion.

“I was thinking about that ‘Apostle’ you mentioned, the one that shot my dad,” Xie Lanshan explained his sudden change of attitude.

“I’ll be able to find out soon, but you better prepare yourself. This person might end up being your father’s closest and most trusted ally.” Mu Kun’s gaze fell on the young man’s lips. Through the vapor inside the room, he could almost feel their allure.

He wanted to lean in closer, but Xie Lanshan remained unfazed. The young man lowered his head and glanced between Mu Kun's legs—

Feeling a bit awkward, Mu Kun leaned back. "Well, fuck, the heat's making me hard!"

Xie Lanshan woke up from his dream.

Song Qilian sat beside his bed. Sunlight from the window adorned her and a slight hint of worry showed on her face. Like a guiding angel from the heavens, she led him out of hell back into the mortal world.

Xie Lanshan apologized. He had lost his cool last night, offending both Yang Lin and Song Qilian.

"Don't worry about it. You're too stressed out by the case. You should find some time to relax." Song Qilian rubbed her right ring finger subconsciously. "Changchang had always wanted to go to a carnival. Do you think you can take a weekend off after the case is over to go with us?"

"Sure," Xie Lanshan responded without hesitation. "I quite like that little rascal."

"Really?" The single mother's worry vanished. Surprised but afraid to make it too obvious, Song Qilian carefully kept her cool. "He also likes you... your gift for him, that toy gun."

The two planned out their future carnival trip, though it was mostly the man speaking and the woman listening. Xie Lanshan sounded excited; Song Qilian smiled. He certainly had changed. He was more talkative and approachable.

Captain Tao's phone call always came at the wrong time. As soon as Xie Lanshan picked up, he heard angry yelling from the other side of the line, "Hey, bastard, you dead yet?"

"Unfortunately, not yet." Xie Lanshan didn't have the energy to bicker with his old friend. "How's the case going? Liu... what did that guy say?" He still subconsciously avoided speaking his name in front of Song Qilian.

"Of course he'll never admit to anything besides sleeping with the victim's wife. He won't acknowledge he killed the man. He said he did think about cutting off the wires in the museum to steal the painting, but he never acted on it. The actual process required a lot of technical knowledge most people couldn't possibly handle—man, isn't he a real piece of shit, sleeping with a married woman and murdering a man? What a fucking tool!"

Xie Lanshan snorted.

"Anyway, come back here if you aren't dead. The good news is Mansheng has successfully connected to that antique seller through her disguise already. They're planning to meet at the club tonight for the first time in person. We need to plan out and prepare for it beforehand."

“Already? I’ll head over.” The good news made Xie Lanshan completely forget Song Qilian. Staying on the line, he only remembered when he pulled off his patient’s gown, then turned around and waved at her.

Flustered, Song Qilian turned her head. Yet the image of that strong and well-built body was imprinted in her mind.

Xie Lanshan quickly dressed and washed his face before stepping out of the hospital room.

Song Qilian called from behind, “The doctor’s report isn’t out yet.”

With the headache gone, he had been restored to full health. Xie Lanshan was ready to get back on the job; nothing could bring more adrenaline than a case with promising leads. He turned his head toward Song Qilian and waved. “You can check the report for me.”

Song Qilian brought up her concern to Xie Lanshan’s primary physician. “He seemed to be in a lot of pain this time. Is it possible this is a symptom of the car crash?”

The doctor said, “The medical report shows his recovery is going well, and the bleeding inside his head is completely gone. However, we can’t exclude the possibility of a hemorrhage during the recovery process; a loss of blood flow to his brain could cause headaches.”

“But this isn’t a normal headache—he fell unconscious!” The doctor’s nonchalant attitude didn’t ease Song Qilian’s concerns. “I’m sorry. I’m not a medical professional and shouldn’t question your diagnosis, but I really can’t help but feel worried. The injuries were severe, but they didn’t even perform open-brain surgery.”

“If necessary, we certainly would.” The doctor dealt with these kinds of family members often and smiled. “Besides, Officer Xie had already received cranial surgery once. It’s not good to open up the skull that often.”

“He has?” Song Qilian was shocked; Xie Lanshan had never mentioned this.

“He’d had this surgery before the crash, but of course, the scar healed up very well, and you can barely tell it’s there.” The doctor nodded. “He must have suffered some sort of heavy injury to his head, either another car crash or something else. Considering he is a cop, this isn’t too surprising.”

(v)

The woman looked unique, to say the least—both beautiful and less than attractive. She had round but sharp eyes, a wide mouth, large gaps between her teeth, a wide chin, and two small beauty marks diagonally above the corner of her lips. Dark freckles dusted the bridge of her nose. She was nowhere near

pretty upon first sight but still alluring and attractive somehow.

The woman's Chinese name was Tang Qinglan, but she called herself Tequila in English, just like the name of her club. The entire club was also decorated lavishly in the same way its owner dressed.

People around her called her Miss T; her demeanor certainly deserved the capital letter. She wore a black suit, and her body language was bold and authoritative. She surrounded herself with beautiful young women by her seat. The boss lady was clearly the center of attention; even ferocious men couldn't help but bow down to her aura.

Nevertheless, with her model physique, Su Mansheng wasn't going to back down easily either. Her slightly foreign looks boldly complemented her tall body; her high nose bridge and sharp chin drew out fanciful curves on her face. Disguised as a French-Chinese ambitious and brassy woman of power purchasing Wei and Jin dynasty antiques, she convinced the target she was a real client. The two women shook hands and greeted each other.

It was 11 P.M.; a sudden fog visited Hanhai City. Outside Club Tequila, an insignificant white minivan waited in a very skillfully hidden spot. No other cars surrounded it and only a tall and lone streetlight shining on the vehicle with its ghastly white glow hovered around it like a sharp beastly fang that ripped through the heavy fog.

Despite the fog, the view through the window was still clear. The inside of the van was fully equipped with listening devices Captain Tao had prepared with his small team.

After a while of carefully listening in, Su Mansheng successfully met up with the target. The doctor skillfully read the atmosphere, easily talking one of Miss T's lackeys into calling one of the thieves.

Xiao Liang clapped his hands in excitement. "Tech team said they've just intercepted the signal of that call earlier—Doctor Su's on a roll!"

"Of course: she's smart and can get things done. She's got flawless looks and talent all in one," Tao Longyue boasted proudly. The last line stuck in his throat before he swallowed it back down: *That's my badass future wife!*

Xie Lanshan said, "Tang Xiaomo did well too. If she didn't help connect these two, it wouldn't have been easy to sneak into a place like this."

Unimpressed, Tao Longyue snorted loudly. "She's a little con artist—of course she's good at lying."

Xie Lanshan sneakily grinned. "Why does it sound like you have something against her? Don't forget that night—"

"Stop it—don't you dare mention it!" Tao Longyue turned his head away. Even after a few days, his face would still burn like hot coal thinking about Tang Xiaomo's antics.

Xie Lanshan laughed quietly. “You have quite a pure maiden’s heart.”

Tao Longyue cooled down his bright red face. “All right, let’s get to business. The item’s in Miss T’s hands right now, and she must still be in contact with the thieves. We’ve already tapped her phone line, as well as those of her subordinates; once the thieves expose themselves, we’re reeling in the net.”

Miss T’s voice rang out from the listening device, “Oh, Mr. Shen, I have a few items here with me. I heard this was from the early Tang dynasty. It’s one of the noble Chu Suiliang’s treasured calligraphy pieces. Can you check if this is the right stuff?” Instead of questioning the authenticity, antique collectors and merchants often asked whether a piece was the right or wrong item.

“Mr. Shen?” Xie Lanshan looked at Tao Longyue. “Shen Liufei?”

Before Tao Longyue could answer, Shen Liufei’s cold and deep voice spoke from the other side. “Sure, let me have a look.”

“Didn’t they say men aren’t allowed inside the club? How did Shen Liufei get in?” When Tao Longyue didn’t show any surprise, Xie Lanshan questioned him, “You knew about this?”

“Of course. He told me already. I think it’s appropriate, so I placed the bug on him,” Tao Longyue explained, though most of his attention was focused on his future wife. “Doctor Su’s a forensic doctor, not an officer. Besides, we can’t let a woman enter a beast’s den all by herself. Making illegal sales of antiques is a punishable crime with jail time; they could easily resort to violence to protect themselves.”

“Shen Liufei isn’t a cop either, just a specialist the municipal bureau hired. If anyone was to sneak in and do undercover work, that should have been me.”

“You know how to authenticate antiques and calligraphy?” Tao Longyue rolled his eyes, then patted Xie Lanshan on the shoulder. “Shen Liufei didn’t don just any disguise. He had his own connections to get in; this is real talent. Besides, he can totally hold his own in a fight.”

This did not help Xie Lanshan relax. “What if our target has a gun?”

Tao Longyue wanted to laugh at his insistence. “That’s what we’re here for, right? You think we’re all huddling up inside a van in this hot weather to feed the mosquitoes?”

Xie Lanshan finally calmed; he certainly couldn’t argue.

Shen Liufei’s verdict came down shortly after. Judging by the selling amount, this was a calligraphy work by Chu Suiliang later in his life. The famed historian’s calligraphy skills grew stiffer and thinner as he aged; the writing format also resembled official script rather than a work of art. However, the structure of the characters and phrasing reflected the historian’s earlier works. In other words, it was a “wrong” item.

Miss T didn't seem convinced. "There's no substance in these words; even a little girl can say things like 'hard as bones' or 'smooth as water' about this writing."

Shen Liufei responded patiently, "According to the Dongtian Qinglu manuscript from the Song dynasty, the ink used for Chinese calligraphy since ancient times differs based on geographic location. The northern regions used pine smoke ink, while the southern regions used lampblack ink. Pine smoke is rich in color, but it's not as smooth and bright black on paper; lampblack is the exact opposite." He paused slightly, waiting for the others to digest his words. "This is a work from Xianqing Year 2, or 657 AD At that time, Chu Suiliang had already been exiled by Empress Wu Zetian into Guilin in Guangxi today, which is down south. However, the ink used here is pine smoke. Are these discrepancies not enough to prove it's the wrong item?"

Miss T clapped in awe. "Looks like the referral was right. Mr. Shen sure is an impressive character."

The AC was not turned on inside the van. Xie Lanshan sat like the proudest food the mosquitoes had ever eaten under August heat, yet somehow he managed to smile sweetly despite being covered in sweat. The dimples on his face appeared as he lifted the corner of his lips like he was the one being praised. "That's right, he's smart and can kick ass; he's got beauty and wits all packed in one."

Unfortunately, others felt the same way. The listening devices filled with the women's flirtatious and sweet remarks.

"Mr. Shen is so well-read."

"Mister, you're so brilliant."

"Mr. Shen is so handsome!"

The smooth symphony of voices somehow turned into roars of thunder in Xie Lanshan's ears, striking down into his head like one migraine after another.

"Everyone in this club is a woman, right?" After receiving Tao Longyue's confirmation, Xiao Liang swallowed his own saliva. "Mr. Shen is so lucky."

"Mr. Shen, I see there's a tattoo on your neck. Can you take your shirt off so we can have a better look?"

The sound of ripping clothing came in, then a wave of playful giggles. Xie Lanshan cursed under his breath—but if they really stripped him down, wouldn't they notice the listening device?

At the same time, the listening device malfunctioned. The audio sounded like a thousand mosquitoes flying around aimlessly on blast. They could make nothing else out.

Had he gotten caught?

As Xie Lanshan frantically assumed the worst, the disrupted signal returned to normal. A brief moment of dead silence followed, then a sudden explosive sound rang from the speakers.

A gunshot. Xie Lanshan's heart jumped into his throat. Without another word, he ran out and forced himself into the club, shoving past the security guard.

There, he discovered the "gunshot" was a champagne bottle's cork.

As Miss T placed the bottle on the table, the seven or eight women inside the private booth all turned to Xie Lanshan.

The young cop was taken aback momentarily. Thankfully, Tang Xiaomo's quick wits saved the day. She quickly raised her hand from the corner of the booth. "It's me, it's me! I ordered a host earlier from my phone! That app is super nice—you guys can try it out next time!" Tang Xiaomo's expression assured him she could still handle the situation and walked up to push him away. "You can go now. Looks like nobody's satisfied with you, so we'll order another one."

Xie Lanshan hadn't even turned around. Smiling, Miss T sat back down. "No, it's fine. Stay here. He's my type."

Chuckling lightly, Shen Liufei poured himself some wine. "Mine too."

Xie Lanshan cursed: *Fuck, now I really can't leave.*

Tao Longyue and his team originally wanted to follow Xie Lanshan into the club, only to hear laughter—they stopped themselves just in time. He didn't end up causing a ruckus, and had instead heightened the atmosphere inside the club.

In middle school, despite maintaining top marks in physical education, Xie Lanshan's limb coordination was infamously awful; he couldn't follow the simplest calisthenic exercises. A tiny amount of mischievousness blossomed within Tao Longyue; the man could easily be made fun of for how awful he danced.

Even Xiao Liang and the rest of the team were curious. One by one, they pressed their heads in closer to their boss's headphones, holding in their laughter, waiting to see how this circus act would play out.

They were disappointed to hear Shen Liufei's voice: "Let's dance. I'll lead you."

Thankfully, the party ended fairly early. Xie Lanshan was completely beat. Social situations were more tiring than the front lines. Shen Liufei and Miss T were on the side, chatting about art and literature, completely ignoring his suffering. On top of that, Tang Xiaomo was the most excitable and active girl in the club. No wonder Tang Xiaomo said the women here were the real

monsters; excited young women were harder to deal with than a group of brutes. He had to sing and dance, join in their selfie games, learn all of their hand gestures and angles to take the photos. Xie Lanshan went from resisting to struggling to accepting his fate, all within a few hours. Perhaps all of his remaining affection and admiration for women had been completely squeezed out of him that night.

The fog had dispersed, exposing the warm moonlight. Xie Lanshan strolled casually through the dark woods with his hands in his pockets. Miss T followed him from behind on her motorbike. The engine stopped and roared, waiting patiently. "Stay at my place tonight."

Shen Liufei had disappeared as soon as he walked out of the door, seemingly to retrieve his car. Xie Lanshan shook his head. "No thanks, I don't sell my body, only my time."

Miss T laughed. "Can I pursue you then?"

Xie Lanshan turned around to look the woman in the eye.

"A fine gentleman for a lady's heart." Miss T seemed to actually have taken a romantic interest. "Let me pursue you, is that all right?"

"If you say it like that... I can maybe consider..."

Before Xie Lanshan could finish, a familiar black bike appeared. Shen Liufei tugged on the man's wrist, answering for him, "No."

"Why not?"

Shen Liufei responded coldly. "He's mine."

Miss T chuckled. "And you think you can claim him as yours because you said so? Do you even think he'll agree to let you kiss him?"

Xie Lanshan didn't even have a chance to respond; Shen Liufei pulled him over. Still seated on his bike, Shen Liufei held Xie Lanshan's face in his hands, then pressed their lips together.

Xie Lanshan had to lift his head upward; the only thing holding him up was Shen Liufei's arm locked around him in an awkward position. His whole body bent in slight discomfort.

But the kiss was sweet. He could feel Shen Liufei's tongue slide deep into his mouth, violently but passionately invading inside. He symbolically tried to resist before he gave in and let himself drown.

Miss T watched them make out for a full five minutes before shaking her head in slight anger. "I should have known you two were a thing, I could sense that gay vibe from afar."

Once the woman left, the two men finally separated but remained in the same position staring at each other in silence.

Xie Lanshan's lips turned numb.

Shen Liufei said, "I'm just preventing you from making a mistake." After all, Yang Qinglan was a black-market antique seller; a relationship between an

officer and a thief was taboo.

The kiss seemed to have eased Xie Lanshan's earlier anger and frustration in the club. He narrowed his eyes. "And this isn't making a mistake right now?"

Shen Liufei said half-heartedly, "Depends on how you see it."

Xie Lanshan replied without thinking, "Then I'll go to your house tonight."

Shen Liufei seemed to be surprised. The man's skin was not as fair as the cop's, but it was still light. Despite his usual emotionless face, a very thin blush of red had appeared.

Xie Lanshan burst out laughing and leaned forward, nudging Shen Liufei. "Hey, cuz, what kind of dirty image did you have in your head?"

Mistaking a line like that for something more scandalous was almost inevitable at a time like this. Shen Liufei finally realized he had fallen into the man's taunt and frowned.

"I want to go to your place." Retracting his laughter, Xie Lanshan put on a stern face. Their faces were still close together; the tips of their noses touched as they spoke. "I want you to draw a portrait for me."

"Of whom?"

"A woman."

As soon as they returned home, Shen Liufei quickly drew the portrait. The two had always been on the same wavelength, so the process didn't take long.

The result perfectly recreated the face of the woman haunting Xie Lanshan's dreams. She was young and beautiful with a round face, thin lips, and elegantly angled eyes. Yet she didn't seem at all happy but tired.

Xie Lanshan held up this drawing and studied it carefully; he was certain she existed. Therefore, he was determined to find her, even if he had to unearth the entire continent himself.

(vi)

The signal tracking was successful; the location of the three thieves was quickly discovered off in a rural area. Captain Tao took his team, equipped with travel-sized signal trackers, and raced through the highway in two cars.

As soon as the typhoon passed, the blazing summer heat had arrived; dry air at night cleared up the black sky like a polished gem. Finally arriving at the small house the thieves were hiding in, Tao Longyue ordered the officers off the vehicles to prepare for an ambush. However, before anyone could get into position, the house exploded.

All of the officers dropped to the ground, dodging the heatwave rolling off the explosion. Their faces were burnt red by the heat and they crawled up off the ground one by one. The small house the thieves were hiding in less than

ten meters away had been the center of the explosion.

Tao Longyue shouted, “Call the fire department right now!”

Someone was trapped inside. Ready to rush in without hesitation, Xie Lanshan poured a bottle of drinking water on his head.

Tao Longyue reached out a hand to stop him, but Xie Lanshan yelled, “The suspects and painting are both inside the house—the firefighters will be too late!”

The moment he stepped in the building, Xie Lanshan discovered a man curled up on the ground with his head covered. Xie Lanshan turned the body over. He was one of the newly recruited security guards of the Crane Museum, and one of the thieves they were searching for, but he was long dead. A single, precise bullet through his forehead had left only a small wound.

The fire wasn’t overwhelming, but smoke filled the interior; sparks danced around the corpses. The heat had distorted the ceiling; the foul smell of burning plastic filled the air. Standing, Xie Lanshan looked through the heavy smoke into the messy interior of the house. Three men lay on the ground—all of them dead. The floor was drenched in fresh blood. Given the fresh wounds, a violent fight had occurred not too long before the officers arrived.

Xie Lanshan couldn’t distinguish colors; the fire was red, the blood was red, everything in his eyes was a burning red. A sharp pain exploded inside his head, ready to rip through his skull. Xie Lanshan rubbed his temples to suppress the pain, searching for the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* and the missing antiques.

A ceramic vase lay shattered in countless pieces—the missing painted Beiqi ceramic vase. Two other torn works of calligraphy sat on the side, but no sign of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*. To avoid the smoke, Xie Lanshan leaned down, searching carefully behind the television screen and beneath the beds—places people would often hide items. Thankfully, he managed to find it.

He opened it up; the painting was safe and unharmed. Xie Lanshan quickly placed the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* back into its protective case.

These thieves were Shen Liufei amateurs. Old calligraphy passed down through centuries and even millennia had very specific preservation methods. Everything from the temperature of the area of the display to the air moisture level to the lighting had strict requirements. The museums in the city would keep the artifacts and paintings hidden from public view and away from sunlight; they would never place a valuable piece of artwork inside a simple case and toss it into a drawer.

Xie Lanshan swiftly took the other two ripped artworks and turned around, ready to leave the burning house as soon as possible, but before he could step out, someone clutched his leg.

One of the supposedly dead thieves suddenly woke up—the security guard Xiao Zhou. Xie Lanshan had a relatively good impression of the young recruit from a few glimpses at the Crane Museum; he would never imagine this man was a wolf in disguise. The security guard's face was covered in blood, lips moving as if trying to speak. However, his throat had been burned, and his voice was hoarse. Xie Lanshan took a while to understand.

"He... help..." A person's desperation to live grew infinitely at the brink of death. Xiao Zhou crawled toward Xie Lanshan and rubbed his teary and bloody face on Xie Lanshan's shoes and pants. "Help me... help..."

For a split second, the dying Xiao Zhou felt Officer Xie's gaze become eerily cold, as though it were full of unexplainable arrogance and disdain. Xie Lanshan's expression froze; he lowered his head. His ghastly gaze fell onto his shoes, then to the man clinging to him. He lifted the corner of his lips as if he was looking at the most inferior and dirty insect he'd ever seen.

Meanwhile, Tao Longyue helped evacuate the other residents inside the building and rushed right into the fire. Amidst the smoke, he saw Xie Lanshan standing like a stone statue and the security guard Zhou Chen, also known as Xiao Zhou, on the ground. The fire was spreading rapidly. Tao Longyue hollered to his colleague, "What are you waiting for? Save these people!"

At that shout, Xie Lanshan's soul returned to his body; the shadow in his eyes cleared, but the migraine grew worse. He handed the case containing the paintings to Tao Longyue, carried Xiao Zhou on his shoulders, and rushed out of the fire.

The smoke had already knocked out the former security guard. Almost as soon as Xie Lanshan picked him up, a broken pillar had fallen where he had been lying.

The suspect was quickly rushed to the hospital by ambulance. Once the fire was successfully put out, the police officers jumped back into the wreck. The fire made investigation exponentially more difficult, only allowing the cops to see a snippet of the truth. Results of the initial investigation showed the four burglars hiding inside the house had been engaged in a fight, escalating when someone shot through the coal gas tank, which blew up. A Type 54 pistol and a massive amount of burnt-up cash were left inside the house. The cash included not only RMB, but US dollars as well, which were all rendered worthless in the fire.

In the meantime, Xiao Liang managed to get in touch with the landlord, who virtually fainted after hearing he rented his house to the wanted thieves of a museum, who had killed each other in a fight. It took a long while to pull his senses back. He sipped the bottled water Xiao Liang handed him and explained that the area was too rural to attract business development, nor

could the building make much money rented out as housing, so there were never a lot of residents. A young man by the last name Zhou arrived one day and requested to rent a unit; the young man seemed quite honest and humble, so the landlord agreed to let him rent the house without questioning his intention.

Tao Longyue questioned the landlord with great suspicion. “The museum got broken into and became a murder scene; this is huge news taking up the headlines across the country. Even the police have offered wanted rewards. Are you saying you didn’t even notice your tenant was one of the thieves?”

The landlord whimpered. “I only met the kid once a few months ago and signed the lease with him after exchanging a few words. The young man was very generous in paying upfront too, and there was nothing else I needed to worry about after, so I didn’t pay much attention. Besides, how could I possibly remember such a plain face for so long? I’m really not trying to hide them.”

Seemingly, these people had planned to steal the painting for a while and had prepared everything beforehand.

After recording the witness account, the team let the landlord off. Tao Longyue turned to Xie Lanshan. “It looks like they got into a fight among themselves. The landlord said there were four people living inside; three corpses were found in the house and one person was severely injured. Their looks also match the surveillance from the Crane Museum. The three of them were in charge of sneaking into the museum, while the last person waited outside with the getaway car.”

Xie Lanshan frowned and pondered for a while. “There’s a ton of cash inside the house, and the antiques they stole hadn’t been sold to the black market. They could easily have taken the money to flee the country at any time. Why would they have to fight to the death?”

“Might’ve been an argument over splitting the loot. Who knows?” Tao Longyue sniffed, took the towel Xiao Liang handed him, and wiped his face. “I didn’t expect them to get ahold of guns, though. These guys aren’t new criminals after all. If they can steal art from a place so heavily guarded, they must have their ways of obtaining weapons too.”

Still thinking, Xie Lanshan didn’t respond.

Tao Longyue studied Xie Lanshan’s profile. The young cop’s face was blackened by the smoke, but his handsome features were still sharp under that layer. His expression remained stern and grave, which was how he often looked when he was deep in thought. His hands were also black; his arm was severely burned and a spattering of blisters had formed on his reddened skin. Xie Lanshan seemed numb to his injuries.

Tao Longyue asked in concern, “What’s up? You’ve been staring out into the void like this since you ran into the fire.”

“Headache.” Xie Lanshan let out a gentle sigh. His injuries seemed like nothing compared to the migraine. “It was killing me earlier, but it’s better now.”

“We’ll have to work a little harder on the murder case. Regardless, we retrieved this national treasure without harm.” After an entire night’s worth of work, Tao Longyue could finally rest up. “Let’s return the artifacts we retrieved first. I don’t feel safe carrying around something worth billions of yuan.”

Tao Longyue was in a hurry to return the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* and the three other artifacts back to the Crane Museum. Regardless of their condition, they were still ancient relics from hundreds and thousands of years ago. Even a broken remnant or a leftover silk sheet was valuable.

Xie Lanshan stopped him. He felt uneasy but couldn’t place his finger on why. No matter how he tried, he couldn’t seem to grasp every piece of this puzzle. The young cop felt as if there was something about the two cases that he still hadn’t fully grasped, making these cases seem visible, but still not clear enough to see the full picture no matter how hard he tried.

Xie Lanshan pondered for a moment and said, “Before we return it, I need to pay a visit to Shen Liufei.”

The answer gave cause to his worry.

Wearing the same nonprescription glasses, Shen Liufei carefully examined the two remaining pieces of the calligraphy and concluded the artwork was fake.

After running around for this critical case for days, Captain Tao had learned a few things about calligraphy. He knew fakes and replicas could be categorized, which greatly affected their value. For example, the piece of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* in the National Museum would also be considered fake, but it was still valuable. “You mean this was a replica hand drawn by another artist?”

“No. This is fake by its most primitive definition; it’s a high-quality print.”

“But this is part of the Crane Museum’s collection.” Xie Lanshan was also slightly surprised. “You’ve been teaching there for a while now and didn’t notice this whole time?”

“I did not.” Shen Liufei frowned. His expression grew grave, also condemning himself. “Falsified artwork has improved over the years with the advancement of technology. It’s not surprising many of these cannot be recognized unless placed under powerful microscopes.”

Xie Lanshan followed up, “Then what about this piece of *Ode to the Goddess Luo* that Li Guochang brought back? Was it really drawn by Tang Zhaozhong?”

“I can’t determine this,” Shen Liufei said. “Tang Xiaomo is the only one who knows the answer.”

Goddess Luo

They couldn't get in touch with Tang Xiaomo during the day. For a high school girl, she certainly spent most of her time skipping like a real delinquent.

Meanwhile, Xiao Zhou woke up in the hospital. Tao Longyue, Xie Lanshan, and Shen Liufei all went to pay him a visit and record his witness account.

The ex-security guard had breathed in too much heavy smoke and severely damaged his lungs. His left leg suffered a second-degree burn. According to the doctor, it needed further examination to determine if amputation was necessary.

Xiao Zhou lay on the hospital bed, listening to how his three other comrades died. For a while, he stared in a daze before sighing in relief. He hadn't been shot—more precisely, the bullet brushed past him. He passed out from instinct. His comrades believed him to be dead after seeing the young man's face covered in blood, and didn't bother to shoot the body again to ensure his demise.

Xiao Zhou admitted the group had been planning the theft for a while. They usually connected with the target before acting; three of them committed the crime while one kept watch. They virtually never failed with this method. In the past, they'd only stolen from high-ranking officials or big company bosses. Most of these people had personal funds earned through shady methods and wouldn't dare call the cops if targeted. Due to the high surveillance, the group had never tried to steal anything from museums or art galleries. Even if they had the heart, they didn't have the guts.

This time, though, they were ordered by someone else who was eyeing objects from the Crane Museum.

Xie Lanshan asked, "Who? Miss T?"

Xiao Zhou shook his head. "I've never seen the person, and I don't know their name; they were super mysterious this whole time. But they're very generous with money and offered to smuggle us out of the country if we got found out."

Tao Longyue asked, "Getting connections before you act is pretty smart, but is it that easy to sneak into a full team of security guards?"

Even Xiao Zhou found that curious. Their IDs and documents were all fake; they couldn't bring out any impressive résumés as a veteran or an athlete, but they somehow managed to make it past the interview. Xiao Zhou theorized that perhaps the museum didn't have time to prepare due to the urgency of the exhibition.

Tao Longyue continued to ask, "So, what happened inside your little hideout? Did you all get into a gunfight because you couldn't decide on how to split the loot?"

Moving his pale lips, Xiao Zhou attempted to recall it. "It wasn't that; we've been doing this for years and knew how to split our earnings... I don't know what happened either, but Da Zhuang—the tall and buff guy among us—suddenly went mad..."

"How are you feeling psychologically?" Even when questioning an injured crime suspect, Captain Tao was still humane and reasonable. He only continued after receiving an affirmation. "Now, tell me exactly what happened the night of the theft at the Crane Museum."

"Captain Tao, can I have some water first?" Xiao Zhou was given a sip and finally felt the energy. "It was storming that night. The museum was especially dark and scary, like there was a ghost hanging behind you everywhere you went. The three of us were actually super anxious. We'd never stolen something so big before and were hesitant. That's when the blackout happened—"

Xie Lanshan asked, "The first blackout?"

Xiao Zhou nodded. "Yes, the first time. Because there was an exhibit the next day, all security guards were trained properly. If anything abnormal occurred, we all had to immediately check for suspicious figures on-site. I was partnered up with Old Qi and had to check the wax figure area in the East Hall. Nothing was out of the ordinary except those wax figures were especially scary at night, like real people. The power came back, and the technician said it was a blackout due to the storm, which was normal—"

Shen Liufei, silent and deep in thought the whole time, finally spoke up, "Did you pay attention to how many Goddess Luo statues there were when checking the wax figure section?"

"Seven," Xiao Zhou answered without thinking.

"Seven? Are you sure?" Shen Liufei pressed his eyebrows together. After the night of the crime, he'd checked the blueprint of the exhibition. There were six wax figures on display, but the actual positioning didn't match the layout exactly. He had asked Old Qi the same question, but the old man was still recovering from being knocked out and couldn't remember.

"There were seven, I swear," Xiao Zhou said. "There were rumors people had died in the Crane Museum, so I was super scared. These wax figures

looked way too realistic, so I checked with my flashlight and counted. There were seven."

Confirming the number of wax figures wouldn't take much effort, so Captain Tao jumped back into the most important part. "Tell me about what happened after the second blackout. You went into the restroom with Liu Mingfang, and you stole the painting; do you think he had a chance to commit murder?"

Xiao Zhou responded firmly, "No way, he didn't kill the man."

Xie Lanshan interrupted, "Why are you so sure?"

"By the second blackout, my partners and I realized it was our chance and snatched that painting, but that Liu guy trailed us in the dark like a scared dog; he screamed stuff the whole way like, 'It's too dark,' 'I'm scared,' or whatever. I could hear him clearly beside me. The East and West Halls are too far apart. There's no way he could make it through the hall in the five minutes he'd need to commit the murder." Because of the look he'd seen on the man's face during the fire, Xiao Zhou was quite scared of Xie Lanshan. He shivered. "I'm already stuck in bed like this; I don't even know if I can walk. There's no reason for me to lie. Besides, I don't know anyone who sells antiques..."

This was reasonable on all fronts. Xie Lanshan fell silent.

Nurses entered to give the patient medication and kindly greeted the officers. Seeing the suspect couldn't provide any new intel, the three men walked outside.

Shen Liufei analyzed the case. "The painting's fake, which means there are two possible scenarios. First, someone replaced the artwork before we found the thieves, then killed all four to silence them. That way, the case would be closed and the true culprit could easily travel abroad with a national treasure. But from what Xiao Zhou said, this doesn't seem to be the case. Then that leaves us with the second scenario—the painting they spent so much effort to steal was a fake printout this whole time."

Xie Lanshan nodded, still deep in thought, when a soul-shattering phone call rang from Ding Li.

An ambassador from the US Embassy had just arrived. When he was still alive, Li Guochang had willed all his assets to his wife Evelyn upon his passing, so Evelyn had requested the municipal bureau return the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*.

Xie Lanshan said immediately, "We can't."

"Why not?" From the other side, Tao Jun took up the phone and began his usual scolding of the young officer the moment he opened his mouth. "I haven't even given you a beating for whisking off a national treasure without permission, you little rascal!"

Just in time, Xie Lanshan pulled the phone away from his ear. He squinted, waiting for Tao Jun to finish hollering before he pulled it back. “I’m simply following procedures. Even under urgent circumstances, the law concerning financial assets states that the investigating unit has the right to conduct authentication within twenty-four hours of retrieval before returning the article to its lawful owner.”

“Oh, and you’re trying to talk procedure and laws with me now?” Tao Jun wanted to laugh but suppressed the urge. The tone of his voice was firm and stiff. “So, why don’t you guys just tell me why you’re doing this?”

Xie Lanshan said, “This painting is the key to solving the murder; if we return it, we’ll lose an important piece of evidence.”

“You’ll have to show it first and prove the connection to the murder. If not, then it’s covered under the rules for cases involving financial and tangible assets. Once an article’s been authenticated and it’s confirmed not to have anything to do with the criminal case, it must be released from official custody and returned to its lawful owner.” Tao Jun didn’t leave any room for argument. “The family is holding on to this part of the law, and even brought in an ambassador. They’re threatening to sue you guys for purposefully taking private property and refusing to return it! I’m giving you three days to show me this ‘evidence.’ If you don’t have it by the time limit, I’m kicking you off this case, and you won’t have any say in what we do with the painting!”

After shooting out these words like a machine gun, Tao Jun hung up.

Tao Longyue noticed his other two colleagues didn’t seem too happy. Shen Liufei’s eyebrows were still pressed together, while Xie Lanshan’s expression grew visibly grave. His eyes hidden behind the light were like voids of darkness.

“This case ain’t easy now that the Americans are involved. I’m sure you know what the pressure within the bureau will be like at the moment too.” Tao Longyue sighed. “I’ll head back to shoulder some of the heat, and I’m assuming you’re not coming back with me?”

Xie Lanshan shook his head. “We still have business to take care of. You can head back first.”

Captain Tao understood the implications behind the “we” that blossomed like a tree of flowers. He wasn’t a selfish man and knew he couldn’t force his buddy to stay with him, so he allowed the two men to handle their own business.

Tao Longyue was ready to leave when Xie Lanshan called out to him, speaking in a serious tone, “Tao, check the old arson case from when Zhang Wenli was still working at the city’s public museum. Get down to the details of the two victims who died and where their current families are.”

Captain Tao left. In the hospital lobby, Xie Lanshan called Tang Xiaomo but received no response, as usual.

He exchanged glances with Shen Liufei. “Hey.”

Shen Liufei nodded. “We’ll know who the culprit is once we ask one of the exhibit workers.”

Xie Lanshan nodded in agreement. “Whoever changed the layout of the wax figures on-site disguised themselves as one, then hid behind the blind spots of the surveillance. That’s the culprit.” The person in charge of overseeing the workers was Li Guochang’s secretary and assistant, Qin Ke. He’d claimed to want to make the exhibition as perfect as possible, but maybe his motive contained something more sinister. The fox’s tail was peeking out.

Still, Shen Liufei’s frown didn’t relax. “From the looks of it, Li Guochang’s death and the theft of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* are two different cases. The mastermind behind the theft of the painting has clearly shown they want to silence everyone involved. I’m especially worried about Tang Xiaomo’s safety.”

(ii)

The Crane Museum had been closed. Within two months, two major criminal cases centered around the museum. The second event occurred right before a highly anticipated national exhibition. The museum director, Zhang Wenli, naturally became the center of discussion among the masses. Of course, everyone feared the Crane Museum might have no choice but to close permanently after the cases settled.

To get past the heavy guards at the scene of the crime, Xie Lanshan flashed his police badge. Together with Shen Liufei, the two men arrived at the East Hall’s wax statue area.

The glimmer of dusk faded into the darkness of night. The museum was virtually empty with only a few lamps still lit inside the East Hall, mirroring the atmosphere of the night of the crime. The goddess statues were under thin layers of plastic sheets. Despite knowing it was all fake, they seemed like real people behind the plastic. Both artless and alive with an array of expressions —joy, bashfulness, melancholy, and grief—each emotion was depicted realistically as if the statues had souls.

After a quick scan of the statues, the two men discovered that Xiao Zhou was correct: there were indeed seven.

Xie Lanshan was startled. “Did we guess wrong?”

Shen Liufei lowered his eyebrows. He seemed quite upset with this finding.

The wax figures were like real people and captured nuances in their expressions. Xie Lanshan leaned in closer and studied the face of one, which

was elegant as a brilliant rising sun. The sorrow-filled, cold eyes enhanced its somber expression. Recalling the inspiration of the painting and the love between Cao Pi and Zhen Fu, Xie Lanshan felt moved. “A love between a god and man is doomed to fail; it must be dreadful to be part of a relationship like this.”

Shen Liufei also turned to the statue. “There was once an evaluation of the painting that said, ‘People who don’t understand this piece of art have never been in love.’”

Xie Lanshan smiled at him. “Then you must be someone who understands this painting.”

Shen Liufei’s expression remained cold; he took Xie Lanshan around the hall to study the statues in order. “The first painting of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* depicts Cao Zhi’s initial encounter with the goddess at the Luo River. This statue is her appearance as she rose from the waters.”

Xie Lanshan studied the statue, an exact replica of the painting. Her gaze fell back toward Cao Zhi. She hid her chin timidly behind the tail fan in her hands, though her eyes were full of immense adoration.

Shen Liufei took a few steps forward and pointed at the second statue. “This is when the goddess danced with the other gods in the painting.”

Xie Lanshan nodded. The goddess had appeared numerous times in the paintings dancing on the water, and it was clear that the wax figures’ creator had chosen one unmistakable scene from the paintings to recreate. The goddess danced with her sleeves twirling in the air; the details of her clothes floated like real fabric. Even the water beneath her foot was recreated with bubble plastic to make everything seem as realistic as possible.

Shen Liufei continued, “This is where the goddess and Cao Zhi confessed their love for each other, gave each other their promised items, and connected their hearts.”

Xie Lanshan followed the man and listened carefully to all the explanations of the wax statue depictions from the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*. Shen Liufei explained with patience, while Xie Lanshan listened like a diligent student. The latter would occasionally glance at the speaker; the man spoke firmly and confidently like a tall tree. His expression was calm, but a spark of fire shone beneath those dark eyes.

This subconscious spark had Xie Lanshan’s eyes virtually glued on the man. Perhaps Cao Zhi in history had truly been a handsome and elegant man like this artist; soft-spoken and well-mannered, the tone of his voice would have easily grasped the heart of his beloved wife. Xie Lanshan’s heart raced in an unexpected direction the more he thought about this.

Not noticing Xie Lanshan’s attention on him, Shen Liufei pointed at the sixth goddess statue. “This is the last time the goddess appeared within the

Ode to the Goddess Luo. As we've established, man and gods were not meant to be together; the goddess couldn't bear to leave Cao Zhi even as she rode back to heaven on her cloud."

As he finished, he turned around and met Xie Lanshan's gaze. Shen Liufei asked coolly, "What are you looking at me for?"

Xie Lanshan cleared his throat awkwardly to pull himself back from his delusions. "If all six of these statues were sculpted to depict the story of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* from the first time the goddess showed up until she leaves, then the seventh one..." Xie Lanshan walked up to the seventh, carefully studying the statue through the thin plastic cover and the dimmed lights. It looked awfully familiar.

He focused all his suspicion and judgment on the statue. As he pondered, the statue suddenly moved—her eyes turned toward him, and a pale hand reached out from behind the plastic cover to grab Xie Lanshan's neck.

Xie Lanshan blocked the sudden attack with his fast reflexes, then grabbed the person's wrist. Turning smoothly, he pulled the individual into a headlock.

"Ouch, let go, let go! You're hurting me!"

The voice was familiar—it was clear and loud—it was Tang Xiaomo.

Releasing her, Xie Lanshan laughed in anger. "You went missing the whole day—why are you hiding here?"

Tang Xiaomo quickly explained. "I'm here to solve the case. I thought about it for a few days. There's no way the murderer could possibly sneak in, kill a man, and then leave during the few minutes of blackout. But what if the person had been hiding inside here since the first blackout?" she boasted proudly, thinking no one else had thought about this possibility, and tilted her head. "All of the security guards said they checked everywhere a person could possibly hide during the first blackout, from the bathroom to each corner, but what if they couldn't imagine the culprit wasn't hiding—and instead standing right in front of them in the surveillance's blind spot?"

Tang Xiaomo's theory was exactly as Xie Lanshan had thought. There were virtually no lamps inside the museum at night and very limited natural light. When he walked in, he couldn't even tell it was Tang Xiaomo hiding at first glance. The Cong family case had already caused a ruckus among the locals, leaving fresh fear inside the hearts of security guards on the night shift. No wonder most of the security guards and even Tao Longyue himself hadn't noticed the culprit standing right in front of them the whole time.

"How did you get in?" Xie Lanshan asked.

"You're the one who said I'm a little thief, so you tell me."

Xie Lanshan studied Tang Xiaomo's outfit; she was wearing a wig and a fancy historic costume that adorned her like a fancy peacock. He laughed. "And where did you get your costume from?"

“Taobao, of course.” Tang Xiaomo took off her heavy headpiece and removed her long skirt, which was hot in this weather. Under her historic costume, she wore a normal T-shirt and short skirt; the costume had hidden the modern clothes beneath it effortlessly.

Tang Xiaomo rubbed her wrist. Xie Lanshan had bruised it. She was clearly displeased with the act. “Man, you police these days sure are open-minded. Are you guys allowed to come out of the closet at work now? I heard everything you guys said earlier, the whole thing about people who don’t understand the painting have never been in love or whatever. And that whole ‘Oh, Mr. Shen must understand this painting’ thing. Man, I could feel my teeth rotting.”

Tang Xiaomo seemed to have a knack for mimicking others and captured both men’s tones of voice quite accurately, swirling around in front of the two with an all-knowing expression, as if she had caught them doing something embarrassing.

Xie Lanshan’s face heated up while Shen Liufei explained pragmatically, “Your grandfather might still be alive.”

Tang Xiaomo was shocked. “Why do you say that?”

Shen Liufei responded with another question, “Didn’t you say before that Zhang Wenli had asked your grandfather to replicate a piece of work from the city’s museum?”

Tang Xiaomo nodded. “Yeah.”

Shen Liufei continued with his usual expressionless face, “Zhang Wenli was willing to risk breaking the rules by allowing your grandfather to take home a prized collection, but not because the two were close friends. His goal was to replace the original with a fake and secretly sell the original overseas to pocket the extra money. That’s why the paintings stolen from the Crane Museum nowadays are also printed fakes; he had already replaced the original without anyone noticing.”

Tang Xiaomo digested this information and called out, seeming appalled, “No way! My grandpa’s an artist—he would never do something illegal!”

“Whether or not he did it voluntarily, was forced to do so, or was completely unaware of his actions, we can only find out if we bring him back and ask the man himself. Since you recalled your grandfather getting into an argument with Zhang Wenli, I’m going to assume he was aware of the scheme. His disappearance must not have been an accident. Perhaps he’s being held hostage somewhere and forced to create a believable replica of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*.”

Xie Lanshan asked, “So Old Man Tang refused to work with Zhang Wenli anymore and was kidnapped?”

Shen Liufei nodded. “It’s a possibility.”

Tang Xiaomo asked, “So then you’re saying Zhang Wenli killed Li Guochang?”

Xie Lanshan shook his head. “No. Zhang Wenli only needed to let these thieves in to steal the painting and then destroy it, so nobody would ever uncover his schemes. It’s a clever move, clearing him of suspicion without killing Li Guochang and causing more trouble.”

Tang Xiaomo panicked. “So if what you guys said is true, where’s my grandpa? He finished the painting and was able to fool even those appraisers. Do you think maybe he’s already been silenced?”

Shen Liufei frowned. “A person being held captive would do their best to signal to the outside about their situation. Your grandfather’s only means of communication would be his paintings. Before I can answer your question, I will need to take a careful look at the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*.”

Xie Lanshan shook his head and sighed. “Don’t even think about it. That’s a priceless national treasure; besides, the US ambassador is also already knocking on our door. If we can’t prove this painting has a direct relation to the case, we’ll need to return it to Li Guochang’s wife within three days.”

Cases involving foreigners were almost always going to be difficult. At that moment, the three didn’t have a solution and left the museum for the day.

Night had fallen. The typhoon passed and returned, bringing another night of rain to Hanhai City. The pouring had recently stopped, so the oriental plane tree beside the road was fresh out of a shower. A passing gust of wind swept the fresh dew off its leaves, splattering the cold water onto their faces.

“Mr. Shen and I can take you back home.” The three walked out of the Crane Museum and stood at the end of the street, waiting to cross. Xie Lanshan turned to Tang Xiaomo in a cold, serious, but caring manner. “Be careful these next few days. You’re the only person who can prove the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* is a fake made by your grandfather, which is the only proof we have of Zhang Wenli falsifying the collection in order to earn extra cash. I’m afraid Zhang Wenli and the people working with him will target you when you’re not aware, like how they dealt with the thieves in the museum.”

Just as the last syllable dropped, a black car parked several meters away like a lurking predator in the dark started its engine. The old Buick’s license plate was covered in a heavy layer of mud, making the numbers illegible. It bolted toward them.

Shen Liufei noticed something was wrong, then shouted, “Xie Lanshan!”

The window of the black vehicle rolled down and a rifle emerged from inside, firing toward Shen Liufei.

Without a second thought, Xie Lanshan pushed Shen Liufei down; the two men rolled on the ground, grabbing tightly onto each other, catching a heavy

layer of rain and mud. Then the black Buick disappeared into the night.

The security on duty heard the gunshot and called the police, then rushed out.

"Are you okay?" Xie Lanshan pressed Shen Liufei down beneath him, ignoring the pain in his shoulders from the violent roll earlier to check the other man's injuries.

"I'm fine." Shen Liufei turned toward the direction the car left and pointed. After the sudden life-or-death situation, the two men stared at each other. Their gazes filled with both intensity and tenderness. "You should get up."

Xie Lanshan pulled himself up and helped Shen Liufei off the ground. Hearing the loud gasps of the security guards, they turned their heads simultaneously.

Tang Xiaomo was lying in a pool of blood. Her eyes were closed. She had been shot.

(iii)

The gunshot incident outside the Crane Museum made the headlines once again. As news passed through various channels, the case riled up another storm among the masses. The city watched it like a hawk, summoning all sorts of unnecessary attention.

After the incident, Xie Lanshan's guilty conscience consumed him. He and Shen Liufei had only suffered minor scratches, but Tang Xiaomo's injury required hospitalization—it was hard to say if she would even make it out alive.

Xie Lanshan almost suspected his real job as a cop was to write reports. He drafted a handful to explain the dangerous, unexpected situation, but his superiors didn't buy into the excuses, nor did the public. Stuck in a tight corner, exhausted from head to toe and from mind to body, he listened quietly to Tao Jun's scolding: *How could a police officer attempt to save himself before an innocent civilian during times of danger*?!

"I did push her aside..." Xie Lanshan didn't explain the bullet was clearly aimed at Shen Liufei, but Tang Xiaomo had ended up getting hit.

"Then you should've stood in front of her and took the bullet yourself! You're an officer—are you going to say you were too scared to do that?!" Zhang Wenli and Ms. Evelyn had arrived at the bureau as well. Tao Jun didn't seem bothered by the outsiders as he continued to denounce Xie Lanshan's lack of professionalism. He blamed the young officer for being too rash, too precarious, too inflexible; he "had no honor in protecting the people."

Veins popping, Tao Jun yelled until Xie Lanshan's expression grew pale—as if he was going to lose his soul from the guilt. Even Zhang Wenli couldn't

stand watching this any longer and spoke up, “Captain Tao, this was a completely unexpected life-or-death situation, and I’m sure Officer Xie didn’t do it on purpose.”

Both Zhang Wenli and Evelyn had paid the municipal bureau visits several times over the last few days, all for the sake of retrieving the painting still being held in custody. Evelyn had the US embassy behind her back and even brought a famous prosecution lawyer over. She was practically looking down upon these incompetent police officers with her chin high. Assuming the murderer and the thieves were the same, the lawyer thought the case was already settled, Most of the thieves had died, and the police had captured the remaining survivor—the billion-yuan painting had nothing to do with the case any longer.

Therefore, the painting was to be returned to its owner within three days as long as new evidence didn’t show up. Every word out of the lawyer’s mouth was a recitation of the law pressuring the thickheaded police officers in the bureau. It was no use to find excuses anymore.

Still fuming, Tao Jun channeled his anger back onto the lawyer. “What kind of new evidence do you want? That injured young woman in the hospital is more than enough proof! This is a country run by law, and any crimes that occur within the territories of our government’s jurisdiction must be tried in accordance with China’s laws. The case isn’t over yet. No matter who you are or what your goal is, I will not allow anyone to close the case so carelessly! The safety of a citizen of our country is being threatened, so we must follow the proper procedures of our legal system and apprehend the criminal!”

The lawyer dressed in a proper suit and the tall Caucasian woman were both stunned. Realizing the stubborn old officer would not yield no matter who else they brought, the two left the bureau. In contrast, Qin Ke maintained his good manners the whole time. He saw Xie Lanshan walk out the door and offered a few words of consolation.

Most of the guests had left already, but Xie Lanshan’s frustration continued to boil within him. He kicked a trashcan right outside the door to relieve some of the stress, but the poor plastic bin flew away and dropped onto someone’s knee.

Xie Lanshan looked up—it was Zhang Wenli.

The museum director wore a gray-white Chinese Tangzhuang jacket with a circular collar, which was quite chic and refined. He wasn’t upset and instead walked up to the young cop with a smile. “Officer Xie, are you trying to blow off some steam?”

Despite having his suspicions about Zhang Wenli, Xie Lanshan still respected the man’s current status as an influential figure in the art industry. He hid the disappointment on his face. “Sorry, Director Zhang, I’ve been late

twice already. I wasn't able to retrieve the paintings in one piece, nor was I able to protect the young woman."

"You've already done your best as an officer," Zhang Wenli said in sympathy. "How's that little Miss Tang doing?"

"The doctor said she's already made it past the critical stage, so it's very likely she'll make it." After venting, Xie Lanshan regained his spirits. His eyes glowed. "I'm waiting for her to wake up. She can prove the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* is a fake and help us capture the true culprit behind this case!"

"That would be great." Zhang Wenli also celebrated. A moment later, he let out another helpless sigh. "The young lady sure has lived a tough life and had nobody to depend on growing up. She's the granddaughter of an old friend. Am I allowed to pay her a visit?"

Xie Lanshan side-eyed the man. Though his gaze was sharp and dangerous, he couldn't make out any affected emotions on Zhang Wenli's old and wrinkled face. Xie Lanshan finally gave the man the address of the hospital. It wasn't a fancy or large institution, but it was still a demure private hospital. The young woman was staying in a rather luxurious single-patient room paid for by Shen Liufei, who also felt guilty.

The two men chatted briefly about things unrelated to the case, then Zhang Wenli excused himself, saying he still had some work to do at the museum.

For the last few days, Tang Xiaomo had rested in the VIP room. Xie Lanshan was her only visitor. The hospital feared commotion might affect the patient's recovery, and the young girl didn't have many friends or family. She had been alone since she was little and only managed to survive by pickpocketing.

Tang Xiaomo was already past critical condition and had woken up briefly once. She now slept soundly. The curtains were rolled down, shrouding the hospital room in darkness. The city outside was brightly lit and sparkling; attractive young women and handsome young men crowded the night market, a paradise the injured young woman couldn't be a part of.

Xie Lanshan gave some instructions to the two nurses on shift and left the hospital. He needed to track down that black Buick and could only squeeze in some time in between the investigation process to pay Tang Xiaomo visits.

Both nurses were young; one watched a television drama while the other ate fried chicken, unaware a shadowy figure had snuck inside the facility and into Tang Xiaomo's room.

The door opened gently; Tang Xiaomo was fast asleep, the IV still attached to her arm.

Before arriving at the hospital, the solicitor checked for security cameras. As expected, this type of private hospital was incredibly careful about

protecting the privacy of their patients and hadn't installed any.

The individual stole an empty syringe. Injection of air into the veins through the IV would cause a failure of oxygen circulation and kill the victim swiftly with no trouble. The cause of death could easily be disguised as an accident caused by the equipment, and even if the police managed to discover the truth, it would be difficult to pin the blame on anyone.

The man reached toward the IV line, yet before he could act, another hand grabbed him.

Completely taken by shock, the man hoped to pull back his arm. However, the person on the bed lifted the blanket and spoke in a familiar man's voice—his deep and alluring voice struck fear in the intruder's heart.

"I've been waiting for you." The light inside the room suddenly turned on; the man stared wide-eyed at the familiar face. Shen Liufei faintly smiled. "Director Zhang."

Zhang Wenli turned to run out the door. Just as he arrived, his eyes widened again, and he took a few steps back.

Xie Lanshan and Tang Xiaomo stood right outside blocking his escape.

Tang Xiaomo had fallen to the ground that day. The bullet shot past her arm; though the wound was superficial, she had bled quite a lot.

The media and news had all reported the young woman "lying in a pool of blood" and painted the entire scene as a gruesome incident—of course, it was mere exaggeration. In Tang Xiaomo's own words, *I was so scared Aunt Flo paid me an early visit this month. I guess it's technically true I really was in a pool of blood?*

The moment he saw Tang Xiaomo fall, Xie Lanshan had an epiphany. Before the security guards could make it out, he rushed over and covered her mouth, whispering to her, "Close your eyes and lie down."

Because the additional paintings stolen from the Crane Museum had already been through the hands of the thieves, proving their authenticity was impossible. If Zhang Wenli wanted to insist the painting had been replaced with a fake *only* after their theft, no one could prove the piece had been a fake all along.

In addition, Evelyn had the US embassy on her side. Even Shen Liufei's authenticity check for the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* wouldn't be strong enough evidence to bring to court.

Therefore, luring out the snake from its nest had been their best option.

Xie Lanshan allowed Tao Jun to denounce him without fighting back as he waited quietly for Zhang Wenli to walk right into his trap. Since the time he kicked the trashcan, the bait had already caught the fish.

“I’ve been hiding here for a few days waiting for you. I would’ve been bored to death if you didn’t come.” Tang Xiaomo sympathetically shrugged at a baffled Zhang Wenli. She pointed at the cop beside her with her thumb. “This guy’s the sharp one, really. Forget about cops—not even thieves are as sly as him.”

Xie Lanshan gave Zhang Wenli a calm smile. “You humble me.”

“I’m here to visit my old friend’s granddaughter.” Zhang Wenli was quite composed for a potential criminal caught in the act; he had already tossed the syringe in his hand and spoke in a pragmatic tone. “This shouldn’t be illegal.”

“Wow, I was waiting to fish up some fat fish or lobster that I could give a good interrogation. How come we only managed to catch an old turtle instead?” Xie Lanshan feigned surprise while insulting the man in a very nuanced manner. His eyes glistened vibrantly despite being quite expressionless. He patted Zhang Wenli on the shoulder and pointed at the TV screen inside the hospital room. “Here, say hi to the camera we installed.”

Up to this moment, Zhang Wenli planned to feign ignorance. He never expected the room to already be equipped to trap its prey.

Shen Liufei walked over and explained on behalf of Xie Lanshan, “This case now involves many outsiders. Without a little more blood and another big event, the bureau might never be pressured into giving the painting back to its owner.”

“That’s not exactly the case either—it doesn’t matter how many parties get involved. This is a case within China, and we as police must handle it in accordance with our legal procedures. We also treat friends and allies fairly, of course.” Lifting an eyebrow, Xie Lanshan squinted. A mischievous look on his face, he spoke in a playful, operatic tone, “But if the wolf comes, we have no choice but to hold up our guns.”

After he was taken to the Hanhai City Municipal Bureau, Zhang Wenli admitted he had been selling famous Chinese calligraphy to foreign auction companies ever since he’d become the vice director of the city’s museum. He even admitted to starting the fire all those years ago, destroying all evidence before the facility received a full security system upgrade and inventory check. He still insisted he had no part in the rest of the case—he didn’t kill Li Guochang, nor did he silence the thieves. He didn’t hire a hitman to kill Tang Xiaomo, or kidnap Tang Zhaozhong. “Why would I kidnap him? You’ve all seen it already—the fake paintings from the Crane Museum were replicated with the latest 3D-printing technology. It’s much more efficient and reliable than hiring an artist to draw by hand.”

(iv)

Xie Lanshan did miscalculate a step of his master scheme. Despite calling it a necessary little evil, he couldn't escape another beating from the Tao father-and-son duo. Like freshly peeled potatoes mashed together blindly without ever realizing what they were being molded into, neither knew of the plan.

After sending off the storm that was Old Tao and earning a sharp glare from an angered younger Tao, Xie Lanshan resolved himself. He smiled and spoke up before his friend-slash-colleague could open his mouth, "Hey, bro, how's investigating the public museum fire seven years ago going?"

Though fuming through his nostrils, Tao Longyue couldn't help but praise Xie Lanshan's wits. "You piece of shit. You really become more reckless and more like an asshole every time, but I do have to admit fighting poison with poison works sometimes."

He raised a hand to call Xiao Liang over and handed Xie Lanshan a pile of documents. The Hunting Net Operation helped the captain collect data from older cases. The city museum arson from seven years ago killed two individuals: a young, unmarried worker and a female manager who had a child staying with her husband. The so-called wire malfunction was nothing but an excuse for the planned arson. Zhang Wenli set the fire to destroy all evidence of his illegal doings.

Xie Lanshan pulled out a photo from the file's folder to reveal a group of grade school students in a school play. Both boys and girls were covered in heavy makeup, but among them was a little boy with a small red mark on his forehead. The boy's angled eyes and high eyebrows stood out among the children, his faint smile even more elegant than a little girl's on his pearlescent skin.

"I heard he moved to the US with his dad when he was very young, so the only photos we have of him are from his childhood." Tao Longyue already recognized the child. He turned and asked Xie Lanshan, "Who does he look like to you?"

Who did he look like? This was the young version of Qin Ke.

Xie Lanshan didn't respond. The young man had been living abroad since he was little. On top of fitting Shen Liufei's profiling, Qin Ke now had a motive to commit the murder. The evidence seemed to have finally pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Since it was after work hours, Xie Lanshan was ready to leave the bureau when Shen Liufei walked out of Tao Jun's office.

Xie Lanshan stared at Shen Liufei without blinking, as if smitten by the artist's cold beauty. "Would you care to visit my place, Mr. Shen?"

Xie Lanshan was planning on going over the case once more, as Shen Liufei had expected. He nodded in understanding. "Sure."

While the two men made their way back to Xie Lanshan's residence, a drizzle fell from the sky. The two returned drenched in rain. Xie Lanshan told his guest, "Go take a shower first. You can borrow my clothes."

Shen Liufei walked into the bathroom while Xie Lanshan lay on the sofa to organize his thoughts on both the case and the guest in his house. He didn't seem to realize he was also paying attention to the sounds inside the bathroom.

The water pouring down echoed behind the closed door; Xie Lanshan could almost smell freshly watered grass after a rain shower. This strange thought summoned another series of fractious associations to the scent. He laughed at his indecency and slapped his own face, forcing his mind back to the case.

On the way back, Shen Liufei told him he was able to carefully check Li Guochang's *Ode to the Goddess Luo* painting under the permission of the Hanhai City Bureau, but he found nothing out of the ordinary.

So just where was Tang Zhaozhong being kept? Was the man still alive or already dead? Also, even if they knew the culprit was Qin Ke, they didn't have proof. They could hardly ask him to put on makeup and dress up as the Goddess Luo, then ask Xiao Zhou if he resembled the extra statue. That wouldn't prove the young man guilty.

Perhaps he hadn't gotten enough rest the last few days waiting for Zhang Wenli to show up in the hospital; Xie Lanshan's head throbbed in pain again. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine. If he was Qin Ke, why would he choose to kill Li Guochang at this time using this method? The motive was clearly vengeance, and he'd used poisoning rather than a hard weapon to avoid leaving blood tracks and exposing his escape route. Cyanide was chosen due to the lack of time the culprit had to commit the crime; the blackout only lasted five minutes, and it took even less time for the security guards to arrive on-site. The culprit needed a swift and clean method for the murder and had no choice but to use fast-acting poison to avoid being caught by a dying Li Guochang. Public security had direct regulations over a dangerous chemical like cyanide in this country, so it was illegal to sell or trade. Qin Ke couldn't get it from regular stores and had to rely on underground methods to purchase it online.

Once, Xie Lanshan had searched cyanide online and did find places secretly selling it, but the first news headlines in the search results were tragically laughable: "Depressed Youth Attempted to Commit Suicide by Swallowing Cyanide"; "Turned Out the Deadly Poison Bought Online Was a Fake."

Considering the culprit had located the blind spots of the surveillance cameras and set up all of the statues, they were a skilled individual to have committed murder under the extreme circumstances. How could someone so scrupulous and calculating possibly make a mistake and leave direct evidence?

The migraine grew stronger. Xie Lanshan furrowed his eyebrows in pain; he hadn't had time to clean his house lately due to his busy schedule, and something felt unusual about this quiet night.

As he closed his eyes to rest, someone walked up behind him. Xie Lanshan didn't open his eyes, assuming it must be Shen Liufei. This man's footsteps were quiet, like a gust of wind blowing across a deserted land. It would have been almost inaudible even if one was awake.

Shen Liufei pressed his fingers on the cop's temples and massaged gently. "Headache again?"

Xie Lanshan allowed the man to step closer to him and nodded lightly. "Yeah."

The cold, long fingers pressed into the fussing and popping veins beside his temples, letting him relax. Shen Liufei studied Xie Lanshan's face—the young cop's long eyelashes cast a dark shadow on his fair skin. Even with his eyes closed, the spirit behind them could bloom fields of elegant spring flowers.

Xie Lanshan didn't reject this closeness, perhaps enjoying this intimacy. He grabbed Shen Liufei's hand, pressing the man's palm to his cheek gently. He didn't hide his trust and adoration.

Shen Liufei's eyebrows pressed together slightly; his gaze sank into a dark color and his expression drifted between joy and anger. He allowed Xie Lanshan to hold his hand for a little while. "During the Han dynasty, a philosopher named Dong Zhongshu once brought up a concept called the Three Parts of Nature. He categorized human nature into distinct groups: the nature of goodness, the nature of the commoner, and the nature of the narrow mind. Mankind is born with one of the three natures, dividing them up among good, average, and evil souls. Which one do you think you belong to?"

Xie Lanshan recalled his past, especially the times when he worked undercover, but couldn't find an answer. He laughed. "Most of those drug dealers called me a saint or reincarnation of Buddha, but I never felt I was."

The moment he opened his eyes, Xie Lanshan was stunned.

Shen Liufei had walked straight out of the shower. His chest was exposed and only a towel wrapped around his waist.

Xie Lanshan stared blankly for a few moments before handing the clean outfit out on the sofa to the other man. "Sorry, I almost forgot to give you a change of clothes."

Without hesitation, Shen Liufei took off the towel. The man was fit and lean. His hips were narrow but firm; the droplets of water formed a glossy layer that coated his skin. His body was a perfectly sculpted silver statue that could have tugged on any maiden's heartstrings—if one ignored the phoenix tattoo on his upper body, of course. The numerous old scars might have been skillfully hidden, but they were still visible and sharp like fresh wounds.

Xie Lanshan's heartbeat raced as he stared at his body. Recalling his earlier fantasies, his face burned up.

The cop's surprise seemed to puzzle Shen Liufei; he asked with a frown, "You've never gone into a public bath, even in school?"

"Ahem." This certainly wasn't his first time seeing a fully naked man. Xie Lanshan cleared his throat and retracted his mildly inappropriate reaction. "I was just wondering. Qin Ke must have decided to kill Li Guochang after hearing the man wanted to cancel the exhibit. He sought vengeance on Zhang Wenli, so he wanted to expose the man's illegal trades during this national event, but why did Li Guochang suddenly decide to cancel?" Xie Lanshan narrowed his eyes and stared right at Shen Liufei. "Li Guochang seemed to have given you a call before he made the decision."

Shen Liufei put on Xie Lanshan's shirt. "Personal business, nothing to do with the exhibition."

Xie Lanshan shrugged. "I'm just asking. You said Tang Zhaozhong must have left a message in the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*—did you find it?"

Shen Liufei buttoned up the shirt, noticing Xie Lanshan's gaze was still fixed on his tattoo. A sudden epiphany struck him as he looked down. "If the painting itself is the flesh and the paper backing is its clothing, then we should be able to find Tang Zhaozhong's message if we remove the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* painting from its backing."

This meant that they would need to dissect the painting. Xie Lanshan's heart jumped. Removing the backing safely from a five-meter-long silk painting would be a massive job. Besides, its authenticity still hadn't been officially confirmed. No one could afford to pay for any damages.

The municipal bureau would also need to report this to the higher-ups and go through procedures, which would easily take another one or two months. Telling whether Tang Zhaozhong would still be alive by then was impossible.

As he pondered, a cat's gentle meowing rang from outside the window. Xie Lanshan opened the window to see a little girl living in the same residential area outside. She occasionally took turns with Xie Lanshan to feed the strays and was somewhat acquainted with the young cop. She held a large wooden box containing five different-colored newborn kittens. Their eyes hadn't fully opened, and they were curled up together giving off a fresh milky scent.

The two chatted briefly through the window of the first floor. The little girl loved cats, but her parents refused to let their daughter keep one. She had been caring for these five newly born little kittens for a few days. Seeing Xie Lanshan's lights on tonight, she'd rushed over as if she had found a savior. "Their mama cat died along with a lot of strays in the area. I sent them to the animal hospital, and the vet said they were all poisoned, but we don't know who could have possibly been so mean..."

Xie Lanshan only now realized what was so unusual about the night—it was too quiet. The cat purrs that normally rang throughout the area had all disappeared.

Xie Lanshan took the box inside his house and smiled at Shen Liufei. "Look, we've adopted five new sons tonight."

As soon as they closed their eyes, the two white cats fell fast asleep. There was a spotted cat and a round orange one, and another endearingly playful striped kitten kept trying to crawl out of the box, even attempting to leave a little mark with its kitten teeth on Xie Lanshan's finger.

Xie Lanshan picked up the two white cats. "Look at these two. They're aloof and antisocial, just like you. How about we call them Li'l Liu and Fei?"

Shen Liufei lowered his head. His wet bangs covered his eyes as he picked up two cats from the box as well. "This one's an eater. This one's naughty; name them Lan and Shan."

There was only the spotted one left.

What should its name be? Xie Lanshan stared at the little fluff ball and pondered when a sudden thought flashed across his mind—like he had an awakening—and he said, "Two days before Li Guochang's murder at the museum, I ran into Qin Ke near my house."

"That has something to do with the case?"

Xie Lanshan's eyes glistened. "Qin Ke could only purchase cyanide from internet sources, and someone so careful would definitely test out the poison before putting it to use. He stayed in a hotel, so bringing in a living animal to experiment on wouldn't be easy. The least suspicious test subject for deadly poison would be stray cats."

Shen Liufei lowered his gaze to play with the kittens. "It's hard to tell if we'll be able to find evidence on the stray cats. Even if you were lucky enough to find something, if Qin Ke insists that he simply hates stray cats to the point of wanting to poison them, you still wouldn't be able to arrest him."

Knowing this was going to be a tough nut to crack, Xie Lanshan sighed. "Premeditated murder is a severe crime, so the processes to determine the validity of any evidence are exceptionally strict. All the proof and evidence must strongly support the case without missing a piece of the puzzle. You know, working in law enforcement sometimes means we face humanity's rotten, evil nature, but the boundaries of the law prevent us from issuing punishment. It's almost ironic."

Shen Liufei didn't seem to agree with Xie Lanshan's point of view. "The police are law enforcers, not arbiters. Nobody's personal moral standard should be placed higher than the procedures."

Whispers echoed in the cool wind; the autumn moonlight shone on the land. At a time like this, Xie Lanshan didn't want to pick a fight with Shen

Liufei and simply nodded with a grin. “My cuz is right. Little bro’s still learning the ropes.” He picked up the kitten named Liu by the nape of its neck and held him carefully, then leaned back on the sofa. He rested his head on Shen Liufei’s legs, still rambling to the kitten. “Hey, little guy, did you hear that? Your mom just scolded your dad, but Daddy wasn’t scared to argue back. He just refused to continue out of love.”

He expressed his disagreement and still took advantage of the leg pillow—what an infuriating man. Yet, Shen Liufei allowed Xie Lanshan to lie on him. His hand brushed across Xie Lanshan’s face and hair as he spoke gently. Xie Lanshan enjoyed this sensation; his breathing grew heavy, and he soon turned his head to bite Shen Liufei’s fingers. His tongue wrapped around the tip of those fingers, gently covering the skin with moisture.

Shen Liufei’s eyes narrowed. He pushed his finger further into Xie Lanshan’s mouth as if to play along with the suggestive overture, tugging in and out. Yet his expression remained neutral, his voice calm, as he said, “You reminded me, though. Someone so meticulous to the point of obsession like Qin Ke could have memorized the area around the museum and fled the crime scene during the brief blackout, but he disguised himself as a statue and stood in the surveillance’s blind spot instead. Also, how could he be sure where Li Guochang would be standing the moment the lights went off?”

Xie Lanshan closed his mouth, still unwilling to let go of Shen Liufei’s finger inside his mouth. Deep in thought, his saliva drooled out from the corner of his mouth, until Shen Liufei carefully wiped it away with his thumb. Xie Lanshan finally spoke. “Maybe Li Guochang had some sort of glow-in-the-dark mark, allowing Qin Ke to locate him immediately when the lights went off.”

Exchanging a glance with Shen Liufei, he recalled the strange white spots showing up on the surveillance screen. Though this *was* a common security camera phenomenon, he now knew that was not the case.

He sat up from Shen Liufei’s lap and gave Su Mansheng a call, requesting another analysis—this time, focusing on the victim’s clothing.

(v)

Qin Ke had only returned to the country for a brief period and wasn’t familiar with the local communities, so he couldn’t have run off somewhere far to poison a few stray cats. That meant his testing location must have been somewhere around his hotel. Perhaps it was the work of karma that Xie Lanshan lived nearby.

Tao Longyue pulled out the surveillance records within the residential area. Thankfully, the records for the last two weeks were still available. The

cameras showed Qin Ke adding something to the bowls the strays fed on. The young man waited to the side for a cat to die before walking back. As he was well-dressed in an old residential area filled with people, no one would have noticed him.

A few other stray cats arrived after to eat and fell one by one, poisoned. The little girl quickly took them to the animal hospital.

The investigation shifted to the nearby animal hospital. According to the vet's records, the stray cat died of cyanide poisoning. However, people often poisoned stray animals on the streets, so the vet hadn't taken any action, as they weren't anyone's pets.

Qin Ke had checked out of his hotel already. As he was about to leave with his luggage, Tao Longyue forced him back into his room.

The cop's appearance was expected, so Qin Ke remained calm. "Does the law say we can't poison stray cats? If there is no other evidence, then please make way. I have a flight to catch."

Qin Ke certainly had the motive and resources, yet they lacked the most important evidence they needed. Tao Longyue was getting a little antsy, questioning Xie Lanshan in a whisper, "Didn't you say you already found hard evidence?"

"Don't rush." The moment he stepped in, Xie Lanshan began checking the hotel room with a powerful flashlight, casually looking around all the corners.

Both Qin Ke and Tao Longyue were getting annoyed. The captain called out, "What are you looking for—you think you can find something just by looking around?"

Rubbing his nose, Xie Lanshan gave the other man a helpless expression. "Looks like I can't." He gestured to call Xiao Liang in. "Maybe there's too many people, and the light's too bright. The evidence is shy. Here, pull down the curtains and help me look."

Xiao Liang followed his orders. Within moments, the heavy curtain removed all natural light, leaving only a lamp hanging from the ceiling of the room. Xie Lanshan walked toward the porch and placed his hands on the light switch.

He smiled at Qin Ke, whose expression grew grave the longer Xie Lanshan stared.

"Three, two..." Xie Lanshan counted down. "One—!"

The last source of light vanished. Bit by bit, white glowing spots appeared on one of the walls. This type of glowing paint would easily lose its characteristic luminescence over time and needed to be flashed with strong light before it could once again shine in the dark.

“The tech team confirmed Li Guochang had this same type of glowing paint on the back of his shirt and beneath his shirt collar. The wrinkles on clothes sometimes hid these marks when he walked, which was why the cameras couldn’t capture it clearly and made it seem like a natural phenomenon.” Xie Lanshan turned the light back on. Looking right into Qin Ke’s eyes, he pulled back his playful expression. “And the paint touched other objects before it fully dried, which exactly matches the paint we just saw on your wall.”

Knowing he could no longer make excuses, Qin Ke’s expression changed. He threw his luggage aside and jumped out the seventh-floor window. He crashed through the canopy outside of the coffee shop’s porch down on the ground level. As if resonating with his courage and rash desperation, even after falling through several canopies and sunroofs, he somehow crawled up from the ground to run.

“I swear—this mother-fudger brownie dingleberry!” Tao Longyue cursed out the window, seeing the cloth awnings had been broken through. He couldn’t let his teammates follow down the same dangerous path and turned around to yell, “Go chase him down!”

Qin Ke ran like a gazelle dashing for his life from a preying lion, swiftly passing through the traffic into a small alleyway. Seeing the suspect was about to disappear, Tao Longyue quickly contacted other departments and searched for backup to block his escape route.

Before Tao Longyue could finish arranging support, Xie Lanshan evaluated an escape route, locking his eyes on a yellow crane truck parked near the hotel. He dashed out the broken window like a bullet onto the patio and called out to the crane driver down below, “Hey, buddy, criminal’s on the run—cop needs a ride.”

The driver immediately understood and turned the crane toward the patio. Xie Lanshan leaped forward and grabbed the hoist. The pedestrians crowded down below all gasped—this scene was even more thrilling than a roller coaster at an amusement park!

The crane arm pulled back in, turned, and lowered its hoist down to a safe distance, dropping Xie Lanshan to the ground. Xie Lanshan dashed off. By the time he was two steps behind Qin Ke, the culprit exhausted his stamina, pulled a knife from his pocket, and swung it aimlessly toward Xie Lanshan. Then he pulled his arm back and placed the knife below his own neck.

Xie Lanshan planned on closing the case, not causing another bloodbath. Frowning, he stopped. “Calm down. Don’t try and amend your mistakes by committing another.”

Blood dripped from Qin Ke’s neck. Xie Lanshan couldn’t stand seeing fresh blood; his head throbbed again.

“What’s wrong with seeking vengeance for my mom?” Qin Ke took a few steps back, pressing the knife against his skin. “Zhang Wenli’s a monster with no feelings; he started a fire and killed her just to hide evidence he was stealing treasured paintings! But what happened next? He was still an influential figure in his damn circle, a respectable director of a private museum! Killing him was the cheap way out. I needed to expose his crimes and destroy his entire career while he was alive!”

Xie Lanshan said, “Zhang Wenli deserves to be punished, but how do you explain Li Guochang?”

Qin Ke sneered. “My plan was flawless. All of these experts had gathered at the Crane Museum for the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*, so every fake painting in Zhang Wenli’s museum would be exposed and his crimes fabricating all of his innocence could come to light. But that Li guy suddenly canceled the exhibit. I’ve been working by his side for so long being ordered around like a dog just for this day—how dare he ruin my plan?!”

Xie Lanshan’s headache grew worse; he almost couldn’t stand. He pressed his hands on his forehead and looked down; Qin Ke threw the knife at him and rushed away.

Xie Lanshan dodged the blade, then chased after the young man despite his headache. The young man didn’t expect his luck to run out. A cab passing the alley struck Qin Ke as he ran out. Fresh blood splattered over Xie Lanshan’s face.

The cab driver slammed on his brakes. Without any attempt to run, he stepped out of the car, desperately trying to explain to the crowd, “It’s not me... I wouldn’t have hit him. This guy ran out... he ran out himself...”

Qin Ke lay on the ground, blood splattered everywhere. He wasn’t completely dead and twitched on the ground like a worm.

At this point, Tao Longyue and his team of backup arrived. Seeing Xie Lanshan’s figure frozen at the scene, he tapped the man’s shoulder. Xie Lanshan suddenly turned his head; his bloody face met Tao Longyue’s gaze.

Tao Longyue’s hand trembled. He pulled back, his heart skipping a beat.

Xie Lanshan’s eyes were frozen in time. Every inch of this body down to its bones and soul no longer belonged to Xie Lanshan.

As an experienced cop, Tao Longyue had seen many sociopathic criminals, but he’d never seen such eyes before; the chilling, horrific calmness pierced through his flesh and latched on to his bones.

“We can close the case now.” Xie Lanshan tossed his headset to Tao Longyue, wiped the blood from his face with his sleeve, and walked off.

That morning on the same day, Song Qilian took the first ferry to visit Xie Lanshan’s mother, Gao Zhuyin. She had often paid visits while the young cop

was undercover but hadn't had time since he returned.

The nurse escorted the guest into the hospital room and greeted Gao Zhuyin, telling the patient she had a guest. Gao Zhuyin had delicate and refined features, so she was a beautiful woman when she wasn't screaming and hollering in madness. Due to the cold wind on the island, she wore a beige turtleneck sweater that outlined her neck elegantly. Song Qilian enjoyed watching Gao Zhuyin under the sunlight, tracing out the image of her beloved man from his mother's face. As soon as she walked in, Song Qilian tended to the withering flowers by the window. Gao Zhuyin sat in her wheelchair and lifted her gaze up to the guest, still basking in her own world without a word.

Song Qilian studied the older woman's face. She couldn't help but compare the nuanced similarities between the family members: Xie Lanshan had a face like Gao Zhuyin, which only looked more similar the more one studied them. Both shared similar high-bridged noses and deep eye sockets, but their spirits were visibly different. Gao Zhuyin was elegant and conservative, but Xie Lanshan was strikingly handsome and alluring. It was an interesting contrast within the family genetics.

Gao Zhuyin asked the nurses for water and fruit as Song Qilian arrived, clearly wanting the nurse to leave. The nurse couldn't fight back, but she was afraid Gao Zhuyin would once again go mad and insisted on staying.

Smiling, Song Qilian assured the nurse she could handle the woman. The frequent guest had a good reputation with the nurses. After ensuring Song Qilian was a licensed counselor, the nurse finally left the room.

"Hello, Auntie, it's me, Qilian," Song Qilian greeted the patient and bowed courteously. She looked kindly into the older woman's eyes. "A-Lan told me he came to visit you two weeks ago. I should have come with him."

Gao Zhuyin opened her mouth and pointed at the door, only saying, "Door."

Song Qilian took a little while to realize the patient was asking her to close and lock the door.

She walked over and gave the nurse outside a smile before following her request. There were no fruit knives in the hospital room, so Song Qilian took a tangerine and washed it, then peeled the fruit with her hands for Gao Zhuyin.

Gao Zhuyin studied Song Qilian coldly. "I'm not mad."

"I know. I trust you. Is there anything you'd like to tell me?" Song Qilian offered a listening ear, hoping to show Gao Zhuyin she was willing to stand on the patient's side.

Gao Zhuyin finally recognized this woman who used to visit her frequently; the cold and distanced look in her eyes vanished. She held Song Qilian's hand, speaking firmly but quietly. "That person isn't my son."

"What?" Song Qilian thought she misheard.

“That Xie Lanshan you saw is not my son.” Gao Zhuyin looked at her resolutely.

Startled by Gao Zhuyin’s gaze, Song Qilian instinctively pulled her hand away. After a while, she finally mustered up the courage to ask, “Auntie, what do you mean?”

Everyone would call her a madwoman whenever she brought this up and laughed it off, so Gao Zhuyin held a distrust for the nurses—she was certain she wasn’t mad. She cautiously glanced at the door to make sure it was locked, then once again grabbed Song Qilian’s hands.

“Qilian, listen to your auntie. No matter how crazy a mother becomes, she will never mistake her own son for someone else...” Gao Zhuyin’s face grew pale; her hands shook. Tears rolled down her cheeks as the word “son” dropped from her tongue. “He’s not my a-Lan. He’s not...”

Painted Skin

Li Guochang's murder was now settled, but the authenticity of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* was still unconfirmed, and Tang Zhaozhong could still be in danger. Tang Xiaomo pointed out the ink stain she had made on the painting when she was younger, but it didn't prove anything. Silk calligraphy passed down over hundreds of years was easily susceptible to minor damage.

When Li Guochang's *Ode to the Goddess Luo* was still in the US, some argued it was an authentic piece by Gu Kaizhi, while others claimed it was a copy drawn by artists in later dynasties. If the debate continued, no one would have even thought it could be the work of Tang Zhaozhong, and the old man might have been long dead already.

Saving a hostage was a race against time. Shen Liufei didn't ask the bureau to hire a professional appraiser. Instead, he removed the painting from its backing by himself.

Thousand-year-old silk paper was incredibly delicate. Despite being fake, the construction to create its authentic look meant that the silk was purposely thin and old, thus making it extremely difficult to remove from its backing. Any careless mistake could easily rip through the fragile silk.

In other words, if this was an authentic piece of art, Shen Liufei would have to pay billions of yuan for any damage.

He performed this task at the artifact restoration department inside the city's museum. Two calligraphy experts skilled in restoring old paintings helped. Shen Liufei's usual calm and steady cold countenance faced the camera, but his actions were careful. His breathing was even, and his hands did not shake, but his eyelashes fluttered like the wings of a butterfly, and a faint sweat formed on his forehead.

Xie Lanshan stood to the side. "Hey, cuz, you got a few billion yuan on hand to pay if you screw up?"

"No." Shen Liufei's gaze remained focused and fixed on his work. "So, can you please be quiet?"

First, he wetted a goat hairbrush with clear water to clean the stains on the silk. Then, a special type of oilpaper was placed on top of the main painting to ensure the silk wouldn't be deformed or damaged. Then, along with the other two restoration experts, Shen Liufei pulled the entire main painting off its backing in one motion.

Everyone inside the workshop held their breath.

After the painting was separated, the group indeed found another layer behind the silk canvas: an image of the world outside the window where the old man was trapped. On the top of the painting was a line of small handwritten text: "Trapped by an acquaintance who demanded the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*. May a kind soul come to my rescue."

Old Tang's words of help were elegant, like the paintings he had worked on his whole life. Tang Xiaomo recognized it: "That's my grandpa's handwriting!"

Tao Longyue tsked in amusement. "I've seen all sorts of people send SOS messages on paper after getting caught up in shady cults, but this is the first time I've seen anyone shove a call for help behind a national treasure."

While Tang Zhaozhong's artwork behind the painting proved this national treasure was indeed a fake, Shen Liufei still let out a small sigh of relief—removing the silk had been an extremely daunting task.

One of the restoration helpers, an old man with snow-white hair, praised Shen Liufei's professionalism and patience. "Restoring ancient calligraphy is an art requiring skills. Mr. Shen here sure doesn't seem like an amateur!"

Shen Liufei gave a humble bow to the old man. "Ten years ago, I had the honor of meeting Mr. Xu Lin, who restored *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*. I learned a few tips from him then."

"Ten years ago? How old are you now?" Surprised, the old man stared at the young man, who looked only to be in his early twenties.

Without hesitation, Shen Liufei gave his birth date and earned another gasp. Xie Lanshan finally relaxed his restless mind and turned his gaze to Shen Liufei. The artist certainly looked much younger than his age, and his pretty face contrasted with his unique tattoo. Despite that, his unique demeanor, passion, and focus seemed to have wiped away any traces of age.

Xie Lanshan had lived as a straight man for thirty years. He had always insisted on loyalty in relationships and only ever developed feelings for Song Qilian. He had never considered an alternative option. Amidst a flash of conflicting emotions, he felt he finally might.

Shen Liufei turned around and gave Xie Lanshan a look. "Is Officer Xie not going to rescue the hostage?"

Xie Lanshan didn't need to worry. Based on the drawing, Tao Longyue had already determined an exact address and rushed out to rescue the old man.

The mission didn't take long thanks to the detailed drawing, which featured a unique structure from the ancient dynastic era locals could easily locate. With the help of regional authorities and other police branches, the team freed Tang Zhaozhong from imprisonment. Tao Longyue cheered for their good luck; by the time they arrived, the old man had been without food or water for

days. If they'd arrived even a minute later, perhaps he would have been dead.

The old man was remarkably thin and only skin and bones. His mental state and fatigue meant he was not in a state for questioning. Captain Tao sent the old man to a local hospital, then transferred him to Hanhai City when his condition was stabilized enough to travel.

Captain Tao and Xie Lanshan let the old man rest for a few days before visiting to ask about the case. Upon arrival, they noticed Shen Liufei was already there.

Despite a few remaining loose strands in the case and the municipal bureau keeping details from the public, intel still leaked out. Both the Crane Museum and the city public museum sent over experts in the art industry to pay the old man a visit, like a little party.

Tang Xiaomo offered tea and water to the guests. Upon seeing her grandfather, she cried her heart out as if the world was collapsing around her; at this moment, aside from her slightly swollen eyes, the joy of reuniting with her family filled her face.

The people unmistakably dressed like artists who had gathered in the room noticed the police's arrival and quickly left, knowing the cops needed to do their work.

Tang Zhaozhong's recovery went well: the old man seemed to radiate vitality. Unfortunately, his eyesight had worsened over the years working in such a dark environment; one of his eyes was close to fully blind.

From Tang Zhaozhong's account, over the last six years, he had been transferred to numerous cities and provinces before finally returning to a place close to home. Whoever held him hostage earned good money off the fake *Ode to the Goddess Luo* and wanted Tang Zhaozhong to work on another piece—but for some reason, the kidnapper never showed up again.

Following procedures for the case, Tao Longyue had to ask if Tang Zhaozhong knew Qin Ke.

Tang Zhaozhong sighed. "After the fire in the city museum, that boy came to find me. He was very aggravated and determined to get revenge for his mother—but I didn't think he would really do something so extreme."

Tao Longyue then asked if he knew Zhang Wenli.

The police had expected the answer. Tang Zhaozhong was a dedicated artist; Zhang Wenli tricked him into replicating famous paintings that he used to replace the originals and lied about what was going on. After the fire, the old artist realized he couldn't allow himself to be used as a tool anymore.

Tao Longyue then asked about Li Guochang.

"I've only heard about him." Tang Zhaozhong shook his head; he sighed and coughed. "It's unfortunate he got involved in this case; it certainly is a loss of innocent life."

Shen Liufei stepped in, asking for more detail as a forensic sketch artist. “Mr. Tang, do you remember what your kidnappers looked like?”

The old man said he had no idea who they were, besides that they were a man and a woman.

The old man struggled to recall the details but still couldn’t remember anything. Xie Lanshan consoled the old man, knowing perhaps he didn’t want to remember the painful encounter. “Mr. Tang, Mr. Shen here is an artist like you. He can help you find the two kidnappers that took you away.”

Together, the two artists exchanged information, trying to piece together a detailed image of the kidnappers. “The woman had a tall nose, a mole below her chin and between her eyebrows. The man looked humble, wore glasses, wasn’t too tall, and was quite large for his height.” The old man sighed. “I could only remember this much, I’m sorry.”

Tang Xiaomo panicked. “Hey, Mr. Shen, my grandpa’s still recovering. Can you find a different time to do all this official business stuff?”

Nodding slightly, Shen Liufei excused himself.

Xie Lanshan followed him out.

Outside the hospital room, Shen Liufei said, “One of the earlier visitors was an art agent. He mentioned wanting to host an exhibit for Mr. Tang.”

Xie Lanshan’s expression lit up. “Already?”

“Thinking about it now, it’s not too surprising. People who heard rumors before the police even made any public announcements are desperate to come up and dig for gold. The art and entertainment industry is no different than a farmer’s market; raw skills won’t get you anywhere because the value of a work depends on one’s ability to advertise. This artist replicated a famous painting so well he confused expert appraisers, and he was also involved in two large cases—that’s an interesting story to fill the headlines with. But since Mr. Tang’s still recovering and is almost going blind, Tang Xiaomo asked me to help pick out some work for her grandfather this Saturday at her place.” Shen Liufei turned to Xie Lanshan. “Do you want to come with me?”

Xie Lanshan wanted to say yes until he remembered. “I promised Qilian I’d take her son out after this case.”

Almost as soon as Xie Lanshan spoke, he felt it wasn’t appropriate, though he couldn’t put his finger on *why*.

“You two...” Shen Liufei gave a small smile in response. “Sounds good.”

“The case isn’t completely settled yet, actually. When we were investigating, we discovered Qin Ke had another cell phone that he used to contact an unknown number the few days before and after Li Guochang’s murder. However, by the time the police retrieved it, the number was already out of commission. This is extremely unusual for an exchange student who’s just barely returned to his home country.” Xie Lanshan trimmed through the

fine edges of the case. “Qin Ke performed the murder, and Zhang Wenli stole the painting, but who kidnapped Tang Zhaozhong, killed the thieves, and shot at us outside the museum? Are they the same group? Maybe it was Miss T, who has direct relations to antique selling. Or...”

“Or,” Shen Liufei looked at Xie Lanshan and said, “one of these people is actually after you.”

Xie Lanshan didn’t voice his opinion. Even after Shen Liufei left, he fell into an awful mood, similar to that night at the boxing bar. While under the noxious gaze of an invisible predator, it was natural to feel threatened.

(ii)

Tang Xiaomo’s house was messy and nothing like a young woman’s comfortable living space. Rather, it was more like a boy’s dorm. Unusual, likely unclean clothes covered the bed and sofa like a hurricane had blown through the house. Perching on said sofa, Shen Liufei noticed something behind him. He pulled out fancy pink lace lingerie from the back of his waist. Holding up the garment, he stared blankly at Tang Xiaomo.

Grinning shamelessly, Tang Xiaomo grabbed her unmentionables. “Sorry, I forgot to clean up.”

Shen Liufei decided to go straight to the point instead of sitting around in this environment. “Where are your grandfather’s paintings?” A sword hanging on the wall inside Tang Zhaozhong’s study caught his attention. Shen Liufei walked toward the blade and lifted his head slightly.

A calligrapher was an individual of class and elegance who studied fine art in all aspects of life. The ferocious and large blade hanging above Tang Zhaozhong’s study was not only eye-catching but also placed so anyone entering the room would see it.

Tang Xiaomo said from behind, “I can take it down for you if you want to see it more clearly.”

Tang Xiaomo pulled a stool over and took the sword off the wall in one swift motion, then handed it over to Shen Liufei. The blade’s body close to the handle was narrower, gradually growing wider toward the curved tip. Though it already seemed domineering on the wall, it was much heavier than it looked. The sheath was crafted from rhino horn and decorated with carvings of dragons and the Chinese characters “Qing Ping.” Shen Liufei turned the blade around and read the two lines of script carved on the sheath: “‘A sharp blade honed through the pyre, for the general until withered to the mire’... what a beautiful sword.”

“Pull it out. It’s even prettier.” Taking the sword, Tang Xiaomo attempted to unsheathe the blade, only to discover it was stuck and refused to budge no

matter how hard she tugged. The sword itself was heavy enough as it was; the little girl's face turned red as she desperately pulled on it. Yet, even with all her strength, the blade and sheath still remained intact.

Watching her struggle, the corner of Shen Liufei's lips lifted. He took the sword back, forcefully yanked on the handle from his wrist, and easily unsheathed it.

The metal body of the blade was exposed with a flash of bright light; the two briefly closed their eyes on instinct before studying the artfully crafted sword.

Shen Liufei asked, "Who forged this?"

Tang Xiaomo answered, "My grandpa's friend, who is apparently some sixth-generation bladesmith. If the guy was still alive, I'm sure he could be nominated as an international heritage."

Shen Liufei placed the blade back in its sheath and said in slight sympathy, "He passed away?"

Tang Xiaomo nodded. "He was just like my grandpa. Didn't know how to catch up with trends or market himself. He only concerned himself with honing his craft and completely ignored basic survival needs; he lived a rough life and passed away from severe illness."

Over the last two years, the government passed numerous bills and policies to support the preservation of intangible cultural heritages, significantly improving the livelihoods of many old craftsmen. However, in the past, many lived with very little support. As an artist and a member of the industry himself, Shen Liufei knew how difficult it was to make a living in these times. In a world where marketing and business overtook fine art appreciation, the stubborn craftsmen who insisted on working for themselves struggled to survive.

Tang Xiaomo pointed at the large vase containing all the scroll paintings and then toward the large pear tree drawer. "My grandpa keeps all of his stuff there. I couldn't bring myself to throw them away even after he went missing."

The drawer was filled with art tools from bamboo calligraphy pens to traditional inkstones. The Tang household might look to be quite poor, but the tools used in the study were all extremely valuable antiques.

Inside the drawer was also a camphor-wood box tied with a red ribbon. Shen Liufei took out the box, removed the ribbon, and unrolled the painting scroll kept inside.

"This is a replica of Qiu Ying's work." Shen Liufei studied the painting. His eyes were filled with commendation, but he kept his lips pressed together. Among the Four Masters of the Ming dynasty, Qiu Ying's works were the most valuable. If this thin piece of paper was claimed to be authentic, it would

be worth more than a ton of pure gold.

Tang Xiaomo sighed. “Maybe it was a blessing in disguise. Grandpa spent all of his life quietly and diligently studying art. Who knew a murder case like this could suddenly bring him fame?”

“Not yet. The police still have to make a public announcement. Then all the media and reporters will break through your door.” Shen Liufei replaced the replica painting and pulled a small stack of news clippings. “Your grandfather hosted his own art exhibit before?”

“That was decades ago, when my dad was just born. I’ve never heard my grandpa mention it before, and he got upset every time I asked about it.”

Back when the news was still primarily on paper, Tang Zhaozhong had hosted his very first and only personal art exhibition. It ended in brutal criticisms from art appraisers and critics, to the point the man couldn’t stand working in the industry and was eventually forced to work at a museum.

Compared to Tang Zhaozhong’s paintings, Shen Liufei was clearly more interested in these old news articles. He studied the stories carefully and noticed a familiar name: Li Guochang.

Li Guochang was the coarsest and harshest with his words—he also was the most revered and respected. At the time, the man was already a household name among antique collectors, so his brutal critique not only devalued Tang Zhaozhong’s art, but also sent his career as an artist to the guillotine.

Shen Liufei recalled Tang Zhaozhong’s words in the hospital. Something was off. He had asked for detail, but Tang Zhaozhong had always responded vaguely. As an artist with the skills to replicate a painting like the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* and fool the eyes of expert appraisers, the old man must have had a sharp eye for detail. There was no reason he couldn’t have remembered his kidnappers’ appearances.

Tang Xiaomo noticed Shen Liufei stood frozen, his expression grave and serious as his eyebrows pressed together. She asked sheepishly, “Is something wrong, Mr. Shen?”

Shen Liufei placed the stack of paper back down and closed the drawer, answering nonchalantly, “Nothing, just thinking about a friend.” The words came true as soon as he said them. After their day out, Xie Lanshan would be getting ready to eat dinner with Song Qilian and her son by now.

“What friend? Officer Xie? C’mon, I can tell you care a lot about him already.” Tang Xiaomo smiled proudly, seeing she’d guessed correctly from Shen Liufei’s expression. “If you care about him, you gotta say it. That guy’s having dinner with his ex right now. Who knows what’ll happen tonight after they eat? It’ll be too late to regret it by the time you realize.”

“You’re right.” Nodding, Shen Liufei walked away.

“Huh? You’re not going to see the paintings?” Tang Xiaomo called out to him to no avail; the man had already left.

The trip to the carnival at the amusement park couldn’t be called a date, nor had Xie Lanshan thought of it as one. He wanted to give a child who lost his father a good time. The entire day felt more like a family gathering from the bumper cars, the dinosaur park, and the roller coasters... They played until night fell and the stars decorated the sky. Liu Chang said to him, “Hey, Uncle Xie, I’m hungry.”

Xie Lanshan generously invited the mother-and-son duo to a fairly priced seafood restaurant. He smiled at Song Qilian. “Good seafood’s the best way to end a good day. Feel free to order what you like.”

Flipping through the menu, Song Qilian asked Xie Lanshan if he wanted clams or oysters.

Xie Lanshan shook his head. “You can decide. I’m allergic to shellfish.”

Song Qilian thought she misheard. “Huh?”

Xie Lanshan nodded. “It’s true.” He recalled the first time he went to Shen Liufei’s house and passed out after half a dozen raw oysters.

“How could you be?” Thinking the man was joking, Song Qilian laughed. “Do you remember that time we went to the beach during the summer of our first year in college? We made it in time for the seafood festival. You and Tao went in the water with nets to catch your own fish and seafood; you ate everything you caught with beer.”

The seafood festival wasn’t the only significant event. It was also the first time the two held hands like a couple. (Tao Longyue was completely wasted.) Flustered, a young Xie Lanshan had reached out but quickly pulled back the moment their fingers touched. After Song Qilian took his hand herself, the young couple had walked together across the beach. The warm sand brushed against their feet while the stars in the sky glittered.

Still reminiscing, Xie Lanshan interrupted her.

“Really? Are you sure?” Xie Lanshan attempted to recall this event. Like a layer of white frost over the freshly watered morning grass, this memory seemed almost fake. Before he could recall anything deeper, it vanished. He smiled and removed his gaze from Song Qilian’s face, then turned to the server walking toward their table. “It’s been years. I don’t really remember. I really can’t eat shellfish now, though. I’ll have a severe allergic reaction.”

Song Qilian’s smile froze.

Xie Lanshan didn’t notice. He pulled the cork off the bottle of white wine and poured it into their glasses. He checked the color first, then smelled the wine. His gestures were elegant and professional.

Sitting on the patio of the restaurant, they enjoyed the evening breeze. Behind them was a large and colorful Ferris wheel turning in the night that cast a unique and fairy-tale-like color on the dark land. Song Qilian should have been enjoying this atmosphere, but her suspicions suppressed all sense of joy.

She recalled Gao Zhuyin's tearful words.

From the side, Liu Chang called out, "Uncle Xie, I want some of that drink too."

Xie Lanshan playfully knocked him on the head, scolding the silly boy, and then poured a tiny bit of wine into his cup. "Don't drink too fast. It's still wine. Also, don't get drunk. Your mom will beat me."

Liu Chang took a small sip of the white wine only to realize it didn't taste as good as he thought. He stuck his tongue out. "Hey, Uncle Xie, my dad didn't kill anyone, did he?"

Xie Lanshan never mentioned the Li Guochang case to Song Qilian or her son, so he assumed Liu Mingfang had suffered a slip of the tongue when he visited. Despite being at odds with Liu Mingfang, he didn't have the heart to destroy the little boy's image of an idol. For a boy of this age, his father was an unshakable idol. Xie Lanshan understood that from the bottom of his heart.

Smiling reassuringly, Xie Lanshan stooped before Liu Chang and looked the little boy in the eye. "We settled the case; your dad didn't kill anyone." For a split second, Xie Lanshan looked exactly how he had in the past: a gentleman filled with morals and justice, a kindhearted and honorable knight.

At the sight, Song Qilian eased. Xie Lanshan wasn't interested in talking about the past, so the topic of discussion naturally returned to Li Guochang's case. "I saw that the news said you guys caught the culprit already?"

Xie Lanshan's eyes glistened. However, his eyebrows still pressed together. "I still think there's something off." Just what about the case didn't sit well with him? Xie Lanshan narrowed his eyes as he pondered.

Song Qilian gave him a gentle smile. "I don't think I can help you with such a difficult question, but I remember a line from a novel I read once. The culprit is often the greatest beneficiary of the crime; do you think it might help to look at the case from this perspective?"

"The greatest beneficiary?" Xie Lanshan repeated Song Qilian's words.

Who could that be?

"I'm just talking to myself. I'm sure this is a simple fact you and Tao know already."

It was indeed common knowledge for police, but the complexities of the case—from the involved parties to the scattered evidence—had overshadowed it.

Xie Lanshan came to a sudden realization; Tang Zhaozhong and Zhang Wenli's witness accounts contradicted each other. Zhang Wenli had mentioned he no longer wanted to work with Tang Zhaozhong since he had access to 3D printing technology. So why would he keep Tang Zhaozhong hostage?

"I have to figure out what's going on." Xie Lanshan jumped from his seat. "Sorry, I don't think I can send you and Changchang back home."

Xie Lanshan called the server over and paid for the dinner. He patted the little boy's head and asked with a grin, "Hey, little guy, can you promise to take care of your mom tonight?"

Liu Chang gave a hard nod. Song Qilian opened her mouth, wanting to get the man to stay. "A-Lan..."

"Oh, right." Xie Lanshan turned back, lowered his body slightly, and gave a courteous kiss on Song Qilian's cheek to bid her goodbye.

Before he made his way out of the restaurant, a call from Shen Liufei arrived. Xie Lanshan picked up gleefully. "Your place or mine?"

The food on the table had barely been touched. Facing the empty seat before her, Song Qilian's heart sank. That strong sense of unease once again consumed her. Compared to the young man of ten years ago, flustered at the thought of holding hands with his crush, he had certainly changed.

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Someone had ordered Xiao Zhou to steal the famous painting, which meant an established criminal organization must have been behind Zhang Wenli. The more Tao Longyue thought about it, the more he was sure Tang Qinglan wasn't as naïve as he thought. Her background was spotless, and she had an impressive résumé with an exceptional academic record and high income. She was the owner of a famous art company which occasionally invested in literature and movies, so she was a considerably successful woman and heroine of the arts.

Yes, Tang Qinglan was a prime suspect, but the cops couldn't send out an arrest warrant without evidence. No use trying to criminalize an art firm wanting to acquire a few pieces for its collection or pointing fingers at the firm for a murder. But he had other fish on the hook.

Ever since Doctor Su had successfully snuck her way into Club Tequila, Captain Tao continued to monitor Miss T and her subordinates, waiting patiently in hopes of catching them illegally trading protected artifacts. But after successfully capturing Xiao Zhou, the bugged line the investigators hacked went completely silent. Captain Tao took a while to realize the target had noticed their bug. Deciding to extend the bait for a big catch, Captain Tao kept an eye on the club.

However, he didn't expect Xie Lanshan to take the initiative. He contacted Tang Qinglan first, urgently requesting a 3D print of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*.

Replicating the painting didn't take long, and Xie Lanshan was once again invited to the club. He had no need to disguise as a host this time; it would have been a pitiful lie.

No events were taking place at the club that day; the ceiling light illuminated the room in an unusual warm and dim color. Tang Qinglan ordered her assistant to give the completed *Ode to the Goddess Luo* to Xie Lanshan. "It's a rush order, so we didn't have time to age the painting. It won't look as authentic as it could."

Xie Lanshan unrolled the full printed artwork on faux-silk paper. The details didn't matter too much; an amateur like him wouldn't be able to tell it was fake. He smiled. "Thanks. I'll pay you back for this."

"You should know how to repay me already." Giving him a coquettish smile, Tang Qinglan leaned in closer to Xie Lanshan. She fixed the man's collar and caressed his chest with her gentle hands. "I saw the video online lately; that's quite an attractive way of holding a gun."

Due to its violent content, the video had long been removed from the internet. The woman must have seen a hidden backup somewhere in the corner of the web. She studied Xie Lanshan's face carefully—the man was already handsome enough in the video, but he was even more attractive in person.

"You already know how I feel about this. Don't you think you're being a little too pushy now?" A sweet scent flew toward Xie Lanshan; he shook his head dramatically and sighed. Gently, he pushed Tang Qinglan off him and, with a faint smile, responded to her in Cantonese, "Sorry, I'm a cop."

Sorry, I'm a cop. Tang Qinglan laughed—this was a famous line by Tony Leung from *Infernal Affairs*.

"I really couldn't tell." Tang Qinglan fixed her posture after a good laugh, her voice still flirtatious. "There's no way such a handsome cop could exist—you must be an elvish prince out to capture every maiden's heart!"

Xie Lanshan had been praised for his looks before, and he normally didn't put too much thought into it. He believed a man's appearance was secondary to his spirit and character, but Miss T's words were straightforward and almost bizarre to the point even Xie Lanshan felt flustered. He rubbed his nose subconsciously. "That's too much of an exaggeration. I'm just presentable at best."

Seeing the man had no interest, Tang Qinglan didn't pursue him any further. "The club welcomes you to visit often, Officer Xie. It's quite a reassuring thing and also an honor to have a cop friend who knows the honest business we do here."

Without a word, Xie Lanshan smiled. He stood up with the scroll in hand and walked toward the door, then turned around and said to the owner, "We'll see if it's honest business or not eventually."

He held up two fingers, pointed at his own eyes, and then to the woman: *I'm watching you.*

Honest people didn't speak in code. Taken aback for a moment, Tang Qinglan burst out laughing.

While Tang Xiaomo was in school, Shen Liufei found some time to pay Tang Zhaozhong a visit with the fake *Ode to the Goddess Luo* painting. As Shen Liufei walked in, the agent who wanted to host an exhibit for Tang Zhaozhong was just leaving. The two greeted each other in the hallway of the hospital; the agent gave a courteous and humble bow to the famous young artist. Uninterested in ass-kissing, Shen Liufei walked off with a blank expression.

Tang Zhaozhong was lying in bed, still in recovery. Shen Liufei gestured for the nurse to leave the room to give them a little privacy. He turned to the old artist respectfully. "Mr. Tang."

He glanced at the table beside the bed, which was filled with supplements and fresh fruits. The agent had clearly been paying numerous visits.

"He's too generous, visiting an old fossil like me so often." Tang Zhaozhong turned to ask Shen Liufei, "Ah, Mr. Shen, how did you find time to visit today?"

Shen Liufei sat beside Tang Zhaozhong's bed. "I have a painting I've struggled with since I started working on it. Even after I completed it, it still feels off to me; I'm hoping you can help me."

Tang Zhaozhong shook his head. "You're being too humble for an established artist. A good painting can't be judged by the age of an artist—besides, I'm not familiar with modern oil painting, so I'm afraid I can't be of much help."

"It's a copy of an old calligraphy painting. My gateway to art was Chinese calligraphy when I was little; I began focusing on oil painting only after I'd grown up."

Tang Zhaozhong was thrilled. "No wonder! I've always thought your work had foundations of oil painting but spiced up with a hint of Chinese calligraphy. It's a very unique style!"

Shen Liufei's good looks certainly helped his early rise to fame. While he didn't believe he was noticeably talented in art, his reputation was firmly established based on his skills. Tang Zhaozhong was different. Compared to this young and handsome artist, the old man spent the majority of his life struggling to make a living with his art. "You're a fortunate and talented young man who earned fame very early on in life. Just like Zhang Daqian and

Fu Baoshi, you were already a professional by the age of twenty."

"It's good to earn a reputation at an early age, but there's nothing wrong with making your debut later. Qi Baishi didn't 'make it' until he was around sixty and became a master of his generation through his unique style. Huang Binhong's debut was even later—he didn't shine until he was eighty." Shen Liufei's flattery was almost ironically sincere, his voice calm. "The point is whether or not you can leave a mark in China's art history. I would think when people talk about late bloomers in the future, Tang Zhaozhong will certainly become a household name."

Tang Zhaozhong's expression was complicated. A mix of joy and melancholy entered his face as the old man finally let out a deep and long sigh.

Shen Liufei said, "I don't draw for myself that often anymore. As of late, my main job has been to help the police capture criminal suspects with a pen."

"How unfortunate, how very unfortunate indeed..." Tang Zhaozhong shook his head in regret. With Shen Liufei's talent and fame, working as a forensic sketch artist in a puny police department was a lamentable waste of talent.

"I don't think it's regrettable at all. Fighting crime and protecting innocent lives is more interesting and admirable than protecting one's small reputation within the art industry." Gaze clear and confident, Shen Liufei studied the old man's face. He slowly unrolled the painting. "Mr. Tang, I still think you should take a look at this for me."

Tang Zhaozhong saw only the corner of this printed version of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* and froze. His muddied eyes were virtually paralyzed, yet still the light inside them vanished.

"This..." Tang Zhaozhong was very familiar with these fake paintings. "This is the lowest form of printed art!"

"Fakes are all the same regardless of whether they were drawn by a person or a machine, neither is superior." Of course, Shen Liufei knew the difference; this comment was pointed.

"You're also an artist yourself—what kind of nonsense are you talking about?! A high-quality replica isn't a worthless copy, nor is it a fake!" Tang Zhaozhong coughed as he scolded the young artist, fuming. "A replica is also a piece of art that deserves its own value! The *Lanting Xu* of the National Museum and Liao Bo's version of the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* are both replicas, but they kept the style and spirit of the original. Are you saying you also consider both of these fake?!"

"Of course I know the difference: I'm an artist myself." Shen Liufei nodded as if he agreed. Yet, after a few seconds of silence, he changed the topic sharply. "But the majority of the masses don't. They will never be able to tell whether the *Ode to the Goddess Luo* that managed to fool even the top art

appraisers and trigger a murder case was a drawing by you or a digital print."

Baffled, Tang Zhaozhong virtually shot himself up from the bed. "What do you mean?"

"The murder Qin Ke committed right before the exhibition seemed like a plan to expose Zhang Wenli's illegal acts on the outside. In truth, you instigated this and used him to kill two birds with one stone. Your real goal was to take vengeance on the art critic who virtually ruined your entire art career—Li Guochang." Shen Liufei paused momentarily. "As for Zhang Wenli stealing from his own museum, you weren't as innocent as you claimed. You didn't get into a conflict with him because you felt guilty; Zhang Wenli decided to replace you with high-tech printing, so there was no kidnapping. You spent six years carefully planning everything out. Even if the police hadn't noticed the hidden message behind the *Ode to the Goddess Luo*, you must have been able to escape by yourself—am I right?"

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Seeming to have already assumed he would be found out, Tang Zhaozhong calmed himself down. "Do you guys have proof?"

"No. Zhang Wenli's witness account won't be enough to convict you, and Qin Ke's already dead. We discovered a phone number had been contacting him before he committed the crime, but I'm sure you've already hidden the phone," Shen Liufei answered coolly. "But just like I said earlier, you also don't have proof."

Not expecting the young man to have something else hidden up his sleeve, Tang Zhaozhong's eyes widened; the wrinkles on his forehead scrunched up as he pressed his eyebrows down.

"You don't have proof to show you were the original artist of that *Ode to the Goddess Luo* piece. If the police decide to replace your fake painting with this printed art and announce it to the public, that is—and trust me, Officer Xie has the guts to do this." Tang Zhaozhong's face was no longer flustered. A deathly pallor covered his old skin; he already knew what the young artist meant. "You will no longer have the fortune to make a mark in art history. You will no longer be the respected Tang Zhaozhong and will always be that nameless, poor museum manager who could never sell a single piece of artwork. Of course, you can spend another six years painting another *Ode to the Goddess Luo* to prove yourself." Shen Liufei's face was blank, but his gaze was cold and piercing. "But could you really? You're already going blind."

Tang Zhaozhong understood. This was both a threat and negotiation. On one side of the scale was the peaceful and tranquil life outside of iron bars; on the other side was the fame and reputation an old artist had been pursuing all

of his life.

The answer was already clear. He had once been like his swordsmith friend, living a rough life to the point of poverty, willingly dissociating himself from modern trends for his own morals. However, his old friend's death only further fueled his frustration at the world's injustice. Yes, injustice.

"Painting is a form of art, but some people turned it into a business. You were fortunate enough to earn fame with one painting, so you wouldn't understand just how difficult the lives of professional artists are. Nobody is willing to support a nameless artist, even if he had the skill to replicate an *Ode to the Goddess Luo* that can fool even the greatest of eyes!" A livid shout roared from the old man lying on the hospital bed. "How could someone with skills as mediocre as Zhang Wenli receive all that attention in the art world? How come I was the one who was forced to dwell in the unknown and forever be forgotten? You wouldn't have heard of my name if I never killed a man! I —I..."

Before he could finish, the old man was hit with a violent coughing episode. He clenched his heart and fell back onto his bed.

Shen Liufei rang the bell to call the nurse, and a doctor rushed into the room within moments. "I've known your name for a while. I knew some art collectors when I was in the States, and one of them had mentioned you specifically once to me. He said that it was only a matter of time for us to see the name Tang Zhaozhong carved into the history of Chinese art." Watching the doctor work to help rescue Tang Zhaozhong, Shen Liufei let out a small sigh before leaving. "Guarding is harder than creating. Artists feed their souls and inspiration with pain. If you had waited a little longer, you could have reached the peak of your career at the most unexpected time. However... it truly is unfortunate."

Shen Liufei walked out of the hospital. Xie Lanshan waited for him by a shaded area at the corner of the street. This whole scheme had been Xie Lanshan's idea. He hadn't told Tao Jun or Tao Longyue knowing they would have shot him down with all sorts of laws, morality lectures, and disciplinary acts. The father-and-son duo would have also later given him a pained look, telling him he had become sly and more manipulative. He was tired of small talks with old men and couldn't even pretend to be genuinely happy for the late fame.

Though Xie Lanshan was confident his plot would work, he needed Shen Liufei to carry it out. Shen Liufei and Tang Zhaozhong were both artists who shared the same sensitivity and eye for craft. The young artist was more fit to dig into the old man's weak spot to yield the results they wanted.

“Did you scare him? Did you tell him he was going blind?” Xie Lanshan seemed a little anxious but also excited; he knew these words would be the final blow to the old artist’s psyche.

“You can disguise yourself as much as you want, but you can never change who you are inside.” Shen Liufei glanced at Xie Lanshan. “I think he will turn himself in.”

“He certainly cares more about his fame and reputation than his life.” Sighing, Xie Lanshan shook his head. He had been holding his breath the whole time; now he finally relaxed. “What else did you say to him?”

“I said that artists need some pain to nourish their souls—” Shen Liufei abruptly stopped.

Xie Lanshan caught on to the unspoken words and asked, “So, what’s your pain?”

Shen Liufei turned toward Xie Lanshan. His expression grew grim. The face seemed to have captured something, as if Xie Lanshan was both the root of his joy and the start of his pain.

Xie Lanshan didn’t pester him further; he was in a good mood today and didn’t want to continue this conversation. Instead, he grinned and raised a hand, hoping to get a friendly high five.

But the artist didn’t respond.

Awkwardly, Xie Lanshan pulled his hand back and narrowed his eyes to study Shen Liufei. The man in front of him had sharp and cold features, an invasive gaze, and a taciturn character. Even the rare smile on his face was always tinted with a sense of distance that pushed everyone aside.

All the same, his face was very pretty. A light flashed across Xie Lanshan’s eyes. The hidden seed of strange feelings inside his heart sprouted into a rapidly growing vine. He grabbed Shen Liufei’s arm, pulled the man close, and leaned down to press a gentle kiss to his lips.

Shen Liufei’s eyes widened; he pushed Xie Lanshan away and threw a punch without hesitation. This was heavy and unexpected. Xie Lanshan fell back a few steps, almost dropping to the ground.

Apparently shocked by his own reaction as well, Shen Liufei let out two heavy breaths of air, then walked away.

He lifted his eyes and saw Tao Longyue. Captain Tao also had his own questions regarding the case and wanted to ask Tang Zhaozhong for more details. He hadn’t seen the kiss earlier but managed to catch Shen Liufei punching Xie Lanshan.

“Huh? What the heck’s up with you guys?” Tao Longyue couldn’t stop Shen Liufei and had no choice but to call out to Xie Lanshan, “He’s got issues!”

The artist half-jokingly flirted with him first, but when it finally got out of hand and threatened to turn into something more, he was also the first to give a hard rejection. Boiling in anger, Xie Lanshan wiped the blood from the corner of his lips. He pushed aside Tao Longyue and stalked off on his own.

The social media circles exploded. A nameless old artist became the hottest name in the country overnight. Not only did the man plan an entire murder which captured the eyes of the globe, but he also had the skills to replicate an *Ode to the Goddess Luo* painting and shake the entire art world. This feat stunned collectors and art critics everywhere. Either way, the man had made a mark in modern art history.

But some were still puzzled—why would the man choose to turn himself in after creating such a flawless plan?

Standing inside an elevator, Tang Qinglan scrolled through the news articles about this case. She lifted the corner of her lips and tossed her phone back into her purse, waiting to reach her floor.

The elevator door opened slowly; Tang Qinglan stepped out, holding her keys.

The moment she opened the door, she felt a mysterious and dangerous air. Before she stepped inside, her instincts told her someone was in the dark room. She prepared herself like an experienced fighter.

"It's me." A deep male voice pierced the silence; he sat facing the window, back toward the door.

"Of course—I knew it was." Giggling, Tang Qinglan relaxed. She even decided to not turn on the lights. The night was still young, but the sky was a gloomy color behind the clouds, hinting at inevitable rainfall. With no lights on, the interior of the house was a fitting shade of black, since this man enjoyed being in the dark.

Still dressed in her men's pantsuit, Tang Qinglan walked over to the man in her high heels. She leaned in closer, her hands on the man's shoulders first, then she gently brushed down toward his chest.

The man gripped her fingers.

The two had an unusual relationship; the man only reached for her wrist and pulled it toward his lips to sniff. Her hands were delicate and soft, the fragrance on her alluring and sweet. Yet the man didn't seem like a lustful character but a conservative gentleman.

He liked this woman, especially her name—a-Lan. These two syllables danced through his teeth like a cotton candy dream.

"Are you thinking about him again?" Tang Qinglan was a gentle sheep with the voice of a siren. "Didn't you already see him at the boxing club bar?"

The man didn't respond, his eyes fixed on the scene outside the window.

In the center of the city was a skyscraper. On the other side of the horizon was another field of colorful buildings shining in the night. With these dim lights, the woman could see the man's scars left by an explosion. He had also lost an eye and had to surgically install a fake one.

"Why don't you get plastic surgery? These scars could easily be removed with small procedures." From her own point of view, the scar was quite attractive.

The man still didn't respond.

"I wanted to bring him home last time to see you. Too bad he was taken away by an artist named Shen Liufei. But he's nothing like what you said. The man you described was virtually a saint, but all I see in this one is a soul filled with deception and danger.

"The cops put up the wanted list already, but those fools won't be able to get away. We might as well offer him a favor. I didn't have time to silence him, so Zhang Wenli turned himself in before I even realized it. Looks like my antique business is going down the drain, and your little pet says he's going to keep an eye on me."

"Then let it die," the man finally spoke up in the dark. "The red ice business is much more thrilling than that old art and antique hustle of yours."

To be continued...

About The Author

Renowned and popular webnovel author in China, graduate of Tongji University in Shanghai and a member of Shanghai's Writers Association. Famous works include *Lip and Sword*, *In the Dark*, and *Gentries of the City*. Jin Shisi Chai is known for her sharp writing, deep insight into social topics, and unique style of prose that earned her a loyal following of readers on social media. Many of her works have sold adaptation rights in China from film to webcomics.